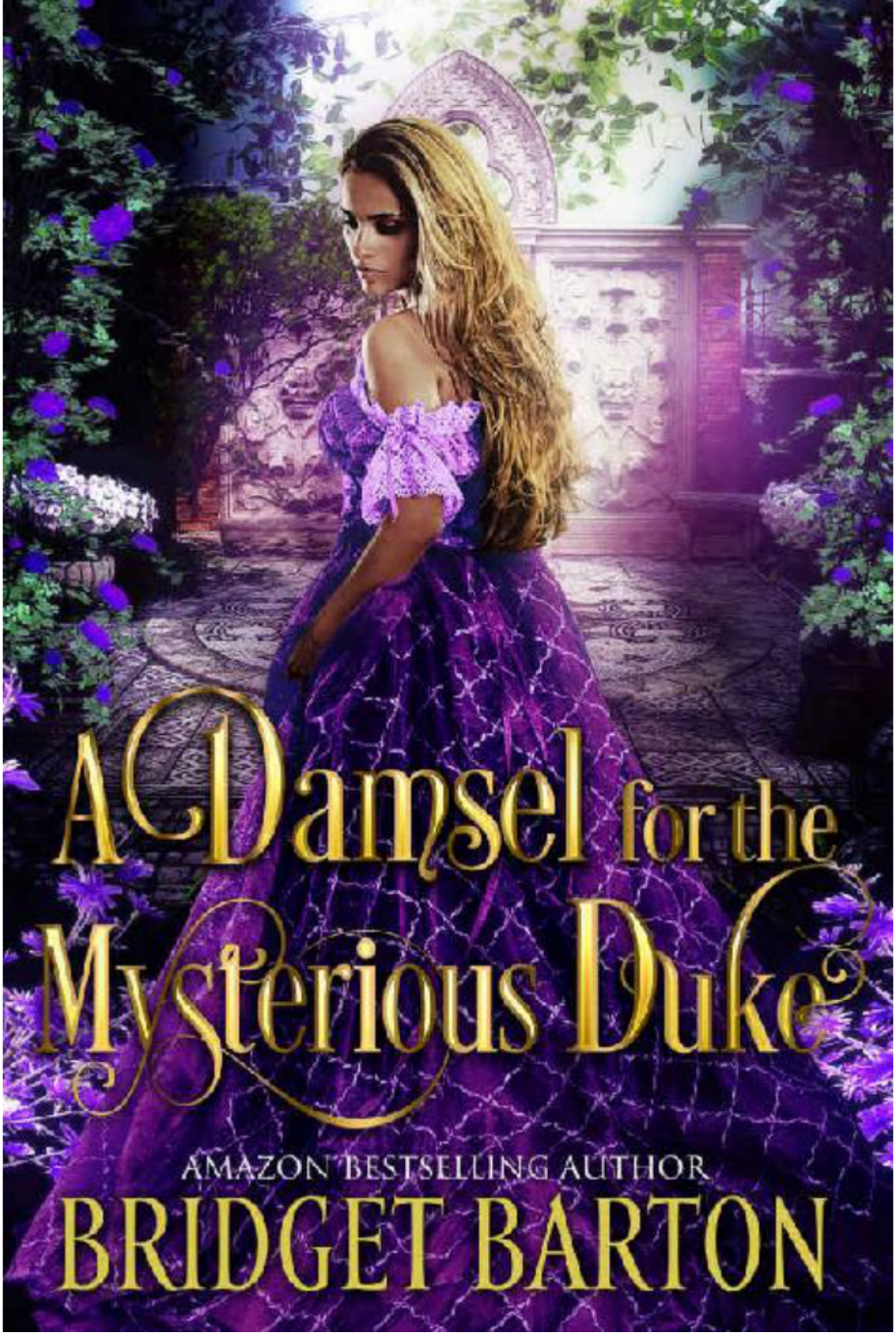

A Damsel for the Mysterious Duke
AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BRIDGET BARTON

A Damsel for the Mysterious Duke

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

BRIDGET BARTON

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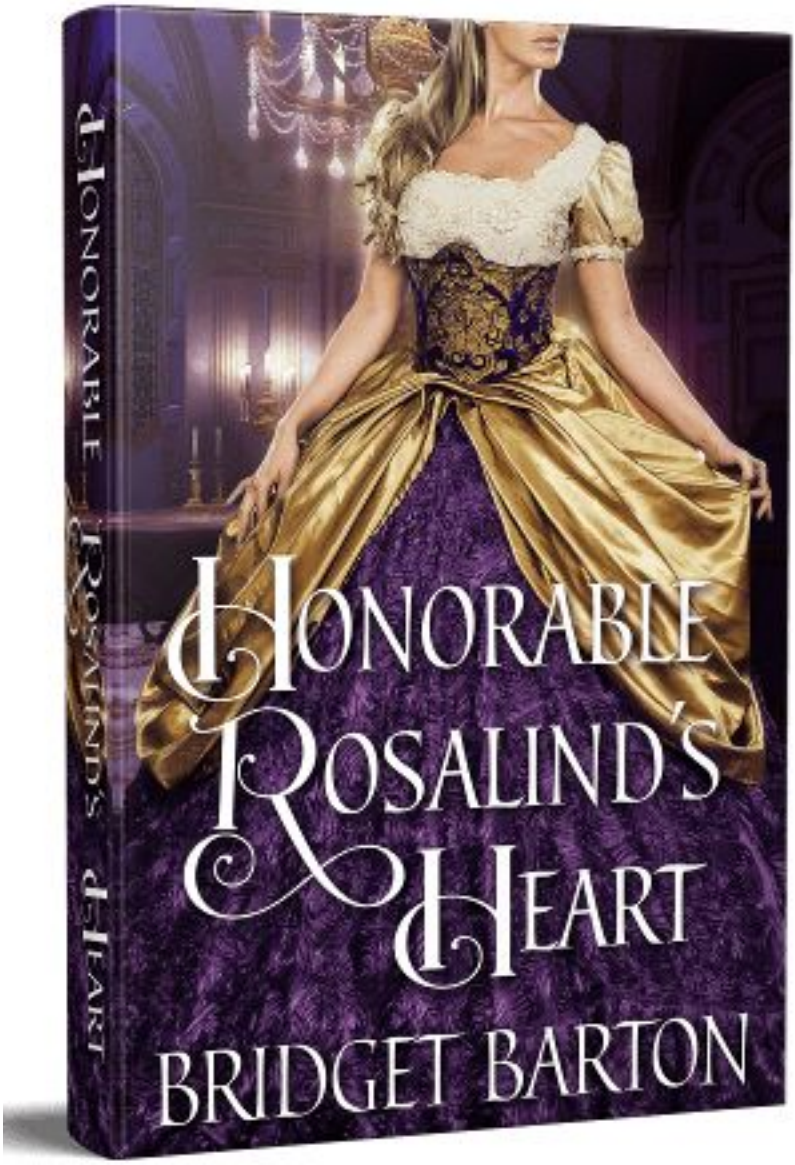
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HONORABLE ROSALIND'S HEART
BRIDGET BARTON
HONORABLE ROSALIND'S HEART

A Damsel for the Mysterious Duke

Introduction

Recovering from a lengthy illness, Georgina Jeffries is sent to convalesce in the Devonshire home of her father's cousin. Finding an instant friendship with his daughter, Fleur, the two of them eagerly await a garden party to be held on the fine estate of the young and handsome Duke of Calder. But when she first meets him, Georgina is certain that she knows him from somewhere, she just cannot place the handsome man anywhere in her memory.

Emerson Lockhart is a man with a secret. Now the Duke of Calder, he is painfully aware that he was not always so. And when he meets Miss Georgina Jeffries again after more than ten years, he is relieved to realize that she does not recognize him as the boy who was once a servant in her home; the boy who had once been her only friend.

But when the Duke lets his old nickname for her slip, Georgina finds herself spiraling back in time, instantly remembering young Sammy White, the servant boy and childhood friend who had disappeared so suddenly and without explanation so many years before.

As a team, can the two of them discover the young Duke's true origins? And can they, along the way, finally navigate the growing romance which both of them would try to deny?

Chapter 1

Although Winton House in Devonshire was very much smaller than her father's estate in Hertfordshire, Georgina Jeffries instantly warmed to it.

It was a fine old house of many quirks, crooked corridors, and narrow secret staircases here, there, and everywhere. And it was set in the most beautiful grounds, both neat and rambling all at once.

From Georgina's chamber window she looked down on a small lake surrounded by beautiful trees and luscious green shrubbery. And all around the water's edge were daffodils, as yet unopened, but with buds enough to promise a fine display when spring began to turn warmer.

"May I come in, Georgina?" came the tentative voice of her cousin Fleur from the other side of the door.

"Yes, of course," Georgina said brightly and turned to smile at Fleur as she came cautiously into the room. "I have just been looking at the view. Really, I do not think I have seen anything so pretty in a long time."

"That is why I told Papa you ought to have this chamber. It really

does have the nicest view of the lake, and when the daffodils are out, there are so many that they seem to glow when you look down upon them." Fleur smiled.

Although the two had met many years before, they were but girls, and Georgina could barely remember the experience at all. Fleur's father, Felix Allencourt, had made the journey from Devonshire to Hertfordshire many years ago to see his cousin, Georgina's father. He had taken his young daughter with him, leaving his son behind as comfort and company to his ailing wife.

Georgina had never met her second cousin Fleur's mother, but she knew that she had died some ten years before.

"It really is so kind of you to have spent so much of your day showing me around the place. And I cannot tell you how comfortable I am already here at Winton House, for it really is such a lovely place. I can hardly wait to see the sea; I so rarely have a chance of it, being landlocked back home at Ashdown Manor."

"If I concentrate very hard, I can almost remember Ashdown Manor," Fleur said thoughtfully. "Well, I can remember how large it is, at any rate." She laughed.

"Yes, it is very large. But I cannot think that I have ever seen a house so well situated as your own. Devonshire really is the most beautiful

county, is it not?"

"I would never wish to leave it." Fleur advanced a little further into the room somewhat shyly. "I thought you might like some help unpacking your gowns and what have you."

"Oh, yes please, that would be most welcome," Georgina said and looked down at her open and unpacked trunk. "I seem to have brought rather a lot with me." She laughed.

"Well, that means that you may stay for a long time." Fleur looked extremely pleased with the prospect. "And I would be very glad of your company. I have friends, of course, but it would be so nice to have a woman of my own age in the house for a while. Jeremy is a fine and attentive brother, but he is a *brother*." She laughed. "And Great-Aunt Belle is a wonderful lady with many stories, but alas she forgets that I have heard the stories over and over again."

"My grandmother was the same," Georgina said brightly as she thought that she and her cousin might get on very well indeed. "And I am keen to meet Great-Aunt Belle to see if she is anything like my grandmother, given that they were sisters."

"I must admit that I am not sure that they were the greatest of friends when they were young girls together," Fleur said cautiously. "And I also must warn you that Great-Aunt Belle often speaks her mind with

little thought to the impact it might have on another. She is very old and often very sweet, so I must beg your forgiveness on her behalf in advance."

"Good heavens, she sounds like my grandmother already. She was also a woman who did not spare anybody's feelings when she had something to say." Georgina laughed and reached into the trunk for the first of her gowns. "I am already looking forward to meeting her, and you need not worry about anything. Your family has been so kind already, and I cannot tell you how pleased I am to be here."

And it was true, Georgina really was pleased to be in Devonshire and the home of her cousins. As the only child of Baron Charles Jeffries and his wife, Jane, Georgina had often felt lonely.

Like Fleur, she had friends of her own, although they were few, but they now seemed so keen to marry that she did not see them anywhere near as much as she might have liked.

She had always wanted a sister, often feeling a little envious of friends who were so blessed. But now that she was at Winton House with Fleur, she had high hopes of finding just that close relationship at last.

"I think the two of us will get along very well indeed," Fleur said as she gently hung one of Georgina's gowns. "I say, this gown is awfully pretty."

“Thank you, it is one of my favourites.” Georgina smiled as she looked at the gown, a well-fitting garment in a very deep blue velvet; a colour which suited her pale complexion perfectly.

“When you are feeling a little better, Georgina, I think we must find a wonderful ball to attend so that you might wear that gown,” Fleur said excitedly. “Or, at the very least, a dance at the assembly rooms.”

“In truth, I am already feeling much better than I have done for some weeks. I think the promise of a change of scenery and a chance to meet family I have not seen since I was a child has done much to improve my health.”

“But we must be careful; we must not set you back in any way,” Fleur said seriously. “As the spring down here can be quite deceptive. Especially being so close to the sea, you must take care to keep well wrapped because there is often a keen breeze.”

“I shall take care, I promise.”

Georgina, ordinarily hale and hearty, had suffered from a lung infection which had seen her bedridden from Christmas until late February.

It had come as a great surprise to all, given that nobody could

remember Georgina being ill since childhood.

When she had finally declared that she was well enough to be up and about again, her mother and father had been greatly relieved. But it had been necessary to keep to Ashdown Manor and out of the cold, so much so that Georgina had become a little melancholy.

The stronger she got, the more listless Georgina became. She had not seen friends and acquaintances for several weeks and had the dreadful sensation that the world had moved on without her whilst she had remained standing still.

When her father had suggested writing off to his cousin in Devonshire to ask that she might convalesce in new surroundings, Georgina had felt an immediate sense of excitement. She had never been to Devonshire but had remembered her grandmother telling her what a beautiful place it was. Not only that, but there were cousins of her own age and the prospect of meeting other new people.

Her mother, of course, had been reluctant. The illness had terrified her, especially when it was at its height, and she had feared, secretly, that she might lose her only child.

Georgina, being a bright and perceptive young woman, had recognized her mother's reluctance to let her go immediately and had done much to allay her fears with promises that she would barely

move from Winton House until it was fully summer. She would only go outside for a few minutes here and there to get some fresh air and nothing more.

With her mother suitably placated, Georgina silently hoped for much more excitement than she had promised her mother she would be a party to. She wanted to walk by the sea and take every opportunity to enjoy herself and to meet new people. Still, Jane Jeffries did not need to hear all about her hopes and dreams for her time in Devonshire.

“Although I must admit it would be wonderful if you were able to attend a garden party at Calder Hall in a fortnight’s time.”

“Calder Hall?” Georgina said with interest.

“Yes, it is the home of the Duke of Calder, Emerson Lockhart.”

“Emerson Lockhart? What a fine name,” Georgina said, already determined that she would most certainly be well enough to go to a garden party on a Duke’s estate, even if she did have to wrap up warm for it.

“Yes, it is a fine name.” Fleur smiled.

“And is he a fine man?”

“I do not know as yet, cousin. He is the new Duke, you see, and still very young. He is not much older than we are, Georgina, at perhaps just one and twenty years.”

“Goodness, that is very young to be a Duke,” Georgina said and tried to imagine herself with such a responsibility just two years hence. “His father must have passed away so prematurely. It seems awfully sad.”

“Very sad,” Fleur said solemnly. “But he was not quite as young as you might suspect. The old Duke was easily in his middle fifties, although that is still no great age I daresay.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Especially when you look at Great-Aunt Belle.” Fleur smiled mischievously. “Whose age I cannot even begin to imagine.”

Georgina laughed along with Fleur, pleased to find herself so at ease with her cousin and so quickly.

“But have you not met Emerson Lockhart before? I mean before his father passed away?”

“No, not once,” Fleur said in a gossipy tone. “Although I must admit that my father was not terribly well acquainted with the old Duke and

his wife when they were alive. And Emerson Lockhart did not seem to grow up at Calder Hall, as I understand it. There is some talk of him having been unwell as an infant and child, and he did not really appear until he was much older." Fleur screwed up her face as if she was not entirely sure that what she was saying was correct. "And then I suppose he would have been away at school and what have you."

"So, he would appear to be quite mysterious."

"Yes, I wonder if that is why he is giving this garden party. He has invited a great many people from the county, I believe."

"And when did he become the Duke?"

"But six months ago."

"I must admit myself already curious to see him."

"I think much of the county is curious to see him if I am honest. This is to be his first event, for I believe he has kept himself very quiet at Calder Hall these last months, although he is often seen about on matters of Duchy business, or so my father tells me at any rate."

"Your father has met him then?"

"Once or twice, I believe. They shared the same attorney, and I think

that they found themselves in one another's company on account of it."

"But they do not share the same attorney now?"

"Unfortunately, my father's attorney passed away some weeks ago. It was a great shame because he seemed like a very nice man indeed. And he kept working right up until the last, even though I am sure that he cannot have been much younger than Great-Aunt Belle."

"Oh dear, that is a shame."

"But listen to me, I am bombarding you with so much information and local gossip that you must already be tired of me," Fleur said apologetically.

Fleur really was sweet, and she looked so much like Georgina that the two of them really could have passed for sisters. They were both fair, although Georgina's hair was a paler blonde than her cousin's. And they both had bright blue eyes, just as each of their fathers did.

"Not at all; I do *love* to hear gossip," Georgina said, and Fleur laughed loudly. "I know I should not admit to such a thing, but it is true. And these last months I have been so starved for information of the outside world that I am very hungry for any news I get, even news concerning people I have never met and do not know."

“Sometimes that is the best news to get,” Fleur carried on, clearly emboldened by her cousin’s open admission. “Because you can hear the gossip first and then get to know the people concerned afterward. I think it makes it much more interesting and exciting.”

“So do I,” Georgina agreed. “Oh, Fleur, I am beginning to feel glad that I fell ill at Christmas.”

“Glad? But why?”

“Because it has brought me here, has it not? I do so love Ashdown Manor, but my few friends are all so keen to marry that they seem to have drifted away from me, even before I became unwell. But to be here now and find that you and I are so alike is such a wonderful thing to me.”

“You really think we are alike?”

“Well, we look alike,” Georgina began. “And we both like a bit of harmless, interesting gossip.”

“Yes, that is true.”

“And we have both missed out on having a sister, so that is just one more thing in common.”

“And I am so glad that you are here too, Georgina. Although I must say that I am sorry that you had to suffer so much beforehand to get here. Your mother and father must have been terribly worried.”

“They were, especially my mother. But then I suppose mothers always are.”

“Yes,” Fleur said quietly.

“Oh, forgive me, Fleur. That was insensitive of me.”

“No, it was not insensitive at all. My mother died so many years ago now that I am over that searing pain. I miss her, of course, but I am able to remember her fondly. I can be grateful now for the time that I did have with her, for she truly was a wonderful, warm mother.”

“I am only sorry that I never had the chance to meet her,” Georgina said truthfully. “But at least I shall get to meet Jeremy when he returns home next week.” She decided to change the subject just a little.

“My brother will like you very well indeed, and I am sure that you will like him once you get used to his silliness,” Fleur said and smiled with an almost motherly indulgence.

“And is Jeremy really so silly?” Georgina said, hoping that he was for she really did like a person with a sense of fun.

“He is, but he is always laughing and is such a nice brother to have around. I only hope that he behaves himself properly at the garden party.”

“Perhaps, between us, we can keep him entertained,” Georgina said, making it clear that she was determined to be well enough to attend.

“I think we have much to look forward to, cousin.”

“We most certainly do, Fleur.”

Chapter 2

“So, Cook has already begun the baking that we will need for the day, and the last of the fresh produce will be arriving tomorrow, Your Grace.” Mrs Thistlethwaite, the housekeeper at Calder Hall, was a woman who was both warm *and* efficient.

“Mrs Thistlethwaite, I am truly grateful for all your hard work,” Emerson Lockhart said and meant it. “Without you, I would not have known where to begin.”

“You do not need to know where to begin with such things, Your Grace. And it is true to say that your father never knew where to begin in such things either. But a Duke has other duties to attend to and must not worry over the ins and outs of the preparations for social occasions. You have a fine staff, Your Grace, and if you simply leave it to them, they will never let you down.”

“Yes, they really are very fine. You all are.”

“You are so kind, Your Grace.”

“And so, there is nothing that I need to do before Saturday? No matters that I must attend to for the garden party to go ahead without a wrinkle?”

“None at all, Your Grace. Mr Murray has all the other arrangements under control, and all of the footmen and maids are already well aware of their duties on the day.”

“And I daresay they have done it all before,” Emerson said with a smile. “Although I cannot remember attending one of my father’s garden parties.” He looked thoughtful.

“No, Your Grace, I cannot think that you have. I daresay you were at Eton or Oxford the last time there was a garden party here. Probably Oxford, I think, for it cannot have been so long ago.”

“Well, you have me assured that everything will go well, and I am very thankful for that.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Mrs Thistlethwaite said, perceptively recognizing that the conversation was coming to an end, just as any good housekeeper of many years standing might.

Mrs Thistlethwaite bobbed a very brief curtsy before making her way out of the drawing room and leaving her master alone once more.

Emerson knew that he had closed down their conversation the minute that it had begun to skirt around the edges of his life. He always shied away from the topic, always keeping in mind his father’s advice.

He knew well that his household staff was not as easily fooled as others in the county. No doubt when he had first appeared at Calder Hall for the first time as a boy of twelve, the servants must have had many conversations between themselves as to his true origins.

Talk of a lifetime of grave illnesses which had kept the boy away from his family home and the care of his mother for so long might well have satisfied most in the county, but Emerson knew that it could not possibly have satisfied the staff; people who had lived and worked at Calder Hall for so long that they must surely have had their own suspicions.

Particularly when the boy was not introduced to the family home until after the Duchess herself had passed away after a long illness.

And yet the Duchess' chronic poor health had certainly lent some weight to the idea that her child had been equally cursed in his own well-being.

Either way, his father had urged him never to be drawn into discussions of such a nature, to give away nothing that would make known his true origins and the start in life that would have been so at odds with anything that anybody around him might have suspected.

And yet it was the longest-serving members of the household staff

who had always accepted his presence without hesitation and had shown him such great kindness.

Mrs Thistlethwaite had been the housekeeper at Calder Hall since the last Duke and his wife had first been married. And Mr Murray, who had been but a second footman at the time, had proved himself a fine and loyal servant who had made his way into the position of butler before Emerson had arrived.

They were both trusted servants in something of an old-fashioned style, two people who would silently hold their master's secrets all the way to the grave, without ever once alluding to them. And he had no doubt that Mr Murray and Mrs Thistlethwaite would always stem the tide of any gossip they heard below stairs, making sure that every member of the household was as loyal as they were.

But, as kind as the two of them had been, Emerson felt most keenly the fact that he did not have any blood kin on the earth, at least as far as he knew.

Even when the Duke had still been alive, a man who had told him most clearly that he *was* his father, still Emerson had not felt that he truly belonged.

Perhaps if he had known his father for all his life and had not met him for the first time when he was already eleven years old, the two of

them might have been closer. Emerson had never doubted his father's love for him, the man had gone to such lengths to see that his son had a place in the world. But still, he had never felt truly comfortable, always having a sense of his old life and the feeling that he was a square peg in a round hole.

If only Garrett Winstanley had not so suddenly died. Of course, as a man in his early seventies who was still so intent upon continuing his duties as an attorney, perhaps it ought not to have been quite such a shock when his heart gave out without warning.

Emerson had found Garrett Winstanley something of a warm character, almost a grandfather figure who always engendered a feeling of security in the young man. And Emerson had always known that Garrett had much more information about Emerson's beginnings than he had ever said.

He was as loyal to the old Duke as the rest of the household, keeping that man's secrets right up until the end.

If only Emerson had determined to question Garrett Winstanley the moment the old Duke had passed away. Perhaps if he had taken his courage in both hands immediately, the old attorney might have relented and given him the information that would have made it, he assumed, so much easier to settle into his life and his duties.

It might even have convinced him that the old Duke really was his own father and that he *did* have a right to be where he was. Perhaps, had he spoken to Garrett, Emerson Lockhart might have felt sure of his place in the world, more comfortable with the idea that he really was now the Duke of Calder.

Garrett had been the first person that Emerson had met when he had begun his new life. Garrett had been the man who had taken him from the old place and brought him to Devonshire to hastily meet the Duke of Calder before being spirited away and coached in manners and bearing so that he might be inserted into life at Eton without drawing too much attention to himself.

But when he tried to think of it all, there was so much that seemed to have passed by in a blur. There was always the idea that he would give himself away and, in doing so, give his father away also. It had been such a tremendous weight for such a young boy to bear, and the concentration that was ever present was so arduous that he very quickly began to forget the details of his life before. Not entirely, but it had always seemed that there was just not room enough for him to think about it with everything else that he had to consider.

“You must not fill your head with so much that does not need to be there, my boy,” his father had said when a fourteen-year-old Emerson had asked him once again to explain how it was he came to be at Calder Hall.

He was home from Eton for the summer and, having only been resident at Calder Hall now and again in the three years since his new life had begun, Emerson was still struggling to adjust. Calder Hall did not feel like home, and yet neither did Eton. He knew that he had had a home once and could remember it quite clearly if he turned his mind to it. But now nowhere seemed like home, and he had genuinely hoped that the man who had told him he was his father could tell him why it was he felt that there was no place for him anywhere.

“But perhaps if you told me a little bit about how I came to be here, Father, I might be better prepared for awkward questions at school,” the young Emerson had ventured, hoping to get around his father that way.

“Why? Have you been asked awkward questions?” the old Duke said and seemed suddenly disconcerted.

“No, Father, no. Not yet, at any rate. I am just worried what I might say if I am asked, though.”

“The master at Eton is very well aware of the situation. He is well informed by Garrett Winstanley that you were gravely ill as an infant and spent much of your time away in treatment and convalescence. He knows that you did not regain your full-strength for some years and were unable to return home fully until you had.”

“But that is not true, is it? I have never been gravely ill, Father, not once.”

“I know, Emerson, but you must keep it in your head that you were. If you train your memory to believe it to be true, it will be so much easier to stick to it, do you see?”

“I do see, but I just do not see *why*. Am I truly your son? Am I really supposed to be here?”

“You are my son, Emerson. I promise you that you are my son.”

“Then why did you not keep me here with you before? Why did I live somewhere else so long? Did you not want me here?”

“Emerson, it is all very difficult to explain.”

“Did the Duchess know about me? She was not my mother, was she?” Emerson said cautiously and was gratified to see the look on his father’s face.

Finally, he had found out some of the truth, despite the fact that he had been quite certain of it anyway. But his father’s countenance had let him know very clearly that he was certainly not the product of the union between the Duke and Duchess of Calder.”

“No, she did not know about you,” his father said quietly and looked down for a moment. “But you are my son, and you do have every right to be here. But things would go very much more easily for you if you let go of this. And things would certainly go very much better for you if all around believed you to be the son of my wife and not the son of another woman. You understand?”

“Yes, I think so,” Emerson said, knowing that his father was very likely trying to protect him against any kind of future scandal, or past scandal at any rate.

“Then that is an end to it, is it not?”

“Yes, Sir,” Emerson said meekly, and then before he could stop himself, he went on, “But who *is* my mother? Did I ever have a mother?”

“Everybody has a mother, my dear boy.”

“But why can I not remember mine? And where is she now? Why can I not see her?”

“I am sorry to tell you that you will never see your mother. No good will come of you wondering about a woman who has always been beyond your reach.”

“Beyond my reach?” Emerson said, fearing the worst. “She is dead?”

“Yes,” his father said solemnly after a long pause in which Emerson thought he might not answer him at all. “And so, you must remember everything I told you about your past, the past that the world should believe.”

“That I was a seriously ill infant who could not be here at Calder Hall.”

“Precisely so.” His father smiled and ruffled his hair. “That’s my boy, you are clever enough to manage, I am sure.”

“Yes, Sir,” Emerson said quietly, knowing that he was certainly clever enough to know that he would never get any more information out of his father than that which he had gleaned that day.

Despite his smile, he knew that the door had been closed for him. He would never know who his mother was or why his early years had been spent the way they had. All he could safely assume was that his father, a man married to an invalid for so very long, had had a love affair with another woman, one who had borne him a child in secret.

And he had been so much of a secret that his father had not called for him until his own wife was so gravely ill that it was clear she would

not survive.

The Duke and Duchess had been sadly childless, a thing which had always left Emerson wondering if his father would have been so keen to seek him out had he not had a legitimate son of his own.

But such thoughts could do nothing but give him pain and, as he had grown into an educated and cultured young man, Emerson had tried to dismiss such musings. He had taken his father's advice and tried to train his mind to believe that the story of his life was, in fact, the truth of it.

And yet, when Garrett Winstanley had finally departed this mortal coil, the old feelings had begun to resurface. The idea that Emerson had missed his one and only chance to discover who he truly was had seemed somehow to open the gates and allow the old doubts and curiosity to flood back in.

Still, there was nothing to be done about it now. He was the Duke of Calder, and there was none who had known any different or dared to suggest otherwise.

All that remained was for him to become a part of the Duchy, at last, to be its figurehead, to be its Duke. And perhaps, if his garden party went well, it would be a start.

Chapter 3

“And have you ever been to Calder Hall before, Uncle Felix?” Georgina asked her father’s cousin as the family rode in his carriage to the Duke’s garden party.

Georgina had felt very much better of late, although Felix had taken some convincing. He was keen that his cousin’s daughter should not fall gravely ill again whilst she was in his care, and he had begged her to exercise caution and to wrap up warm, despite the fact that it was a fine spring day.

“A time or two, but many years ago. Only for very big events like the one we are to attend today. I cannot claim to have ever been to anything more intimate, such as a dinner, but rather events which tend to be open to the county.”

“And that was when the old Duke was still alive, Felix?” Georgina went on, full of curiosity.

“Yes, I have only ever been a guest of the previous Duke.”

“But you have met the current Duke.”

“Yes, Georgina, I have met the current Duke.” Felix laughed, seeming

to enjoy his young relation's curiosity and enthusiasm. "But really only ever in passing and quite accidentally when we have both found ourselves in the offices of Garrett Winstanley at the same time." His voice trailed off. "Dear old Garrett."

"What does he look like, Papa?" Fleur said, clearly as excited as Georgina.

"Like a young man with pale brown hair," Felix Allencourt said with some amusement.

"No, that is not what I meant at all, Papa," Fleur complained, and the whole party laughed at her exasperation.

"What she meant, Father, was to ask if the man is handsome at all?" Jeremy Allencourt said mischievously. "For I do believe that both my sister and my cousin intend to marry him."

"Jeremy!" Fleur said in chastisement.

"Yes, Jeremy," Georgina said and found herself enjoying being at the centre of such a lively family. "That is perfectly silly, two women cannot marry one man."

"Ah, but they might fight for him," Jeremy said dramatically.

“You really are every bit as foolish as Fleur told me you would be,” Georgina said teasing him.

“I most certainly am,” Jeremy said, a broad grin lighting up his fair and handsome features.

Jeremy had been staying with an old school friend when Georgina had first arrived at Winton House, returning only in the second week of her stay. But, just as Fleur had been, Jeremy was instantly likable, and Georgina had warmed to him immediately.

And Fleur and Jeremy had such a wonderful friendship that Georgina had come to realize just how much she had missed by being the only child of her parents. Whilst she had always wanted a sister, the short time she had spent with Jeremy Allencourt had made her begin to wish that she had had a brother also.

“I am afraid that I did not study the new young Duke with the same enthusiasm a young lady might,” Felix said with amusement, and it was easy to see that Jeremy had inherited his ready wit from his father. “So, I shall be of little use to you in this conversation.”

“Papa, you are teasing me I am sure,” Fleur said with contrived innocence. “But no matter, we can decide for ourselves when we get to Calder Hall.”

“*If* we ever get to Calder Hall,” Jeremy said hurriedly. “For I do believe that this fine gravel path might go on forever.”

Georgina looked out of the window and noted that her cousin was right after all. They had turned onto the drive which would lead to Calder Hall some minutes before and yet still there seemed to be no sign of the house itself.

There were many trees, and so it was likely that the house was simply obscured, but still, Georgina had the sense that she was most likely entering the grandest and largest estate she had ever set foot on.

As Fleur and Jeremy continued to chatter and tease one another with occasional interjections from their father, Georgina looked out of the window. They seemed to be crossing field after field, many of them separated by lines of trees and even a great lake in the middle of it all.

Turning in her seat to look out of the other window, Georgina could see the densest woodland, almost large enough to call a forest. It was certainly extensive, and she thought that a person might easily spend all day wandering its pathways without ever covering the same ground twice.

How fortunate the Duke of Calder was. If the outer reaches of his estate were anything to go by, the house and grounds itself must be indeed a sight to behold.

And Georgina did not have long to discover the truth of that, for as their carriage carried on along the pathway which now dropped down, the house and grounds came suddenly into view.

At the same time as Georgina's mouth fell open, she heard her cousin Fleur gasp. Surely every visitor coming to the Calder estate for the first time must have been subject to the same sensation of delight and surprise as they came over the brow of the hill.

"Goodness me, this most certainly is a very grand pile," Jeremy said and then laughed as he looked back and forth between his cousin and his sister. "And the ladies are speechless for the first time, which is quite a curious sensation is it not, Father?"

"What a shame that you do not find yourself so just now and again, Jeremy." Felix laughed. "It might make for a nice break for the rest of us."

"I know you cannot possibly mean that, Father," Jeremy said and chuckled. "But tell me, ladies, have you recovered your tongues? What do you think of the place?"

"I have never seen anything so stunningly beautiful in all my life," Fleur said breathlessly.

“And you, cousin Georgina? What have you to say about Calder Hall in all its glory?” Jeremy went on.

“I have never seen a place so large,” was all that Georgina could say, despite there being so many other observations she might have made.

They continued their journey in silence for a while, and Georgina was content to stare at out the ever-approaching Hall. The building itself was in three stories and of a pale beige stone with so many mullioned windows she could not count them. The main part of the hall was large and rectangular, except where it bowed handsomely around the main entrance where four immense stone columns held up a semicircular canopy over the wide stone steps.

From each side of the rectangular hall came two long and sprawling wings, again with many windows and smaller doorways, although both were only two stories high.

There were also a great many stone outbuildings here and there, each seemingly with their own courtyard and gardens.

All in all, Georgina could hardly begin to imagine that one man lived there all alone. Obviously, he would have an immense household staff, but in the main part of the hall itself, the Duke of Calder would be quite solitary.

Something about it made her feel a little sad, although she could not think why. Perhaps it was because she could see that there must surely be more than a hundred rooms in so immense a place, if not more, and she instantly imagined herself alone in a home of such size without family. Surely it must be a dreadfully lonely experience.

Georgina shook herself, remembering that a young man who was also a Duke was likely to have a great many friends and visitors and would probably never know a moment's peace.

The gardens were also quite a sight to behold. There were great rectangular lawns everywhere, with trees on one side and wonderful box hedging cut into immaculate cubes on the other. There were other pathways, walkways constructed of box hedging which had been clipped so neatly that there could not have been a stone wall built anywhere that was more level and precise. And the gravel pathways here and there created features of their own, all of them converging upon a large square of gravel with a small round lawn in the middle, upon which sat a great circular stone with an iron sundial on top of it.

Where the edge of one of the great lawns met the gravel apron at the very entrance of the hall, there was an attractive line of trees cut very neatly into conical shapes. Georgina stared at them mesmerized, realizing that there was not an inch to choose between one tree and its neighbour. They were absolutely exact and precise, and she wondered exactly who it was who kept them so.

Beyond the great hall, Georgina could see trees and greenery far off into the distance, and she wondered if the grounds at the back were as extensive as those at the front.

No doubt she was soon to find out, for there was no sign that visitors to the garden party were gathered in the grounds at the front at all. There were many carriages already drawn up on that great gravel apron, so she knew that other guests must have surely arrived.

“Well, here we all are,” Felix Allencourt said with a curious grim determination.

Georgina immediately realized that her father’s cousin was keen to get any greetings over and done with, to see an end to that initial awkwardness before it was even begun.

And she did not envy him his position, for as head of that particular household, it was for him to lead his little party into that social occasion and for them to simply follow.

When they had all climbed out of the carriage, a very smart and handsome young footman in full livery came to guide them through a great archway in the west wing of Calder Hall and out into the grounds beyond.

Once again, Fleur gasped, although much more quietly this time. And, in truth, Georgina would have done the same had she not stopped herself, for there in front of her was such a magnificent sight as she had never seen before.

The lawns at the back were equal to those at the front, immaculate and full of interestingly cut box hedging. In the centre of the largest of the lawns was a stone fountain so large that the sound of the water falling was pleasantly all-pervasive.

The whole garden seemed to be awash with colour as ladies and gentlemen dressed in their very best paraded this way and that, admiring the rose gardens that were only just in bud, or staring up silently at one of the many beautiful stone statues that were so well placed that Georgina had the feeling that she had stepped into a wonderful painting; a painting of the most perfect gardens and the most perfect garden party, something so beautiful that it could almost not exist in real life.

There were tables everywhere and footmen and maids either serving behind them or ferrying food and drinks this way and that. Georgina had never seen so many servants in all her life but realized that there must be many more still below stairs working away to continue to provide all that was needed in the garden.

She realized, of course, that such an immense place would surely need

a staff so large that they would almost resemble a small army.

“His Grace is receiving guests on the far lawn, near the fountain, you see?” the young footman said, clearly indicating that the party ought to make their way over and join the small queue of guests waiting to be greeted by their host.

“Thank you kindly, young man,” Felix Allencourt said with a smile, and the young footman bowed quickly before turning to make his way back to the front of the hall to receive yet more guests.

“Goodness me, I think that the Duke will be greeting people for his entire afternoon,” Fleur said in a hoarse and excited whisper. “Unless he only takes a minute or two with everybody he greets.”

“Oh Fleur, are we to have your commentary throughout the entire day?” Jeremy said teasingly.

“Yes, you must endure it, Jeremy. I am excited, and I do not care to hide it.” Fleur laughed. “And you will not spoil it for me with your cheeky comments.”

“I would not dream of it,” he said, and Georgina felt very touched when she saw Jeremy reach out and squeeze his sister’s hand briefly. “I truly wish you a very wonderful afternoon, my dear,” he went on, and his sister turned to smile at him.

“Can you see anything of the Duke yet?” Georgina said in hushed tones.

“Yes, there he is just there,” Felix responded quietly and lightly inclined his head in the direction of a young man who was smiling and talking with a middle-aged couple who appeared to be quite ostentatiously dressed.

No doubt they had been so keen to show their own standing in the world that they had rather outdone the Duke himself.

“Oh yes, I see,” Fleur said, inserting herself between her father and Georgina. “He is quite simply dressed, is he not? But I must say he is very *well* dressed. I wonder if that makes sense at all.”

“It makes perfect sense, my dear,” Georgina said with a laugh. “And you are right, he is quite immaculate without being at all overdone.”

The Duke was wearing dark cream breaches and very well made black knee boots. His tailcoat and waistcoat were of the deepest blue and both tailored to perfection. And his shirt stood out brilliantly white in the bright sunshine, its necktie full and yet not at all elaborate. Georgina thought that a young man could not be better and more sensibly dressed than the Duke of Calder.

If only she could get a little closer and study his features better still. She could see that his hair was thick and well tamed, giving the appearance of hair that could be, on a different day, quite unruly. It was a curious colour, neither brown nor blond, but rather a pale silvery brown that she thought most appealing.

As they moved ever closer to the Duke, a very smart man who must surely be the Duke's butler approached them.

"Might I introduce you to His Grace in a moment, Sir?" The butler said with measured politeness.

Georgina thought that it was a lovely way of asking Felix exactly who he was so that he could announce it to the Duke and the Duke could give the impression of knowing exactly who Felix was.

Not that Georgina was disparaging, for there must surely be many people in the vast crowd whom the Duke did not know, or did not recognize at any rate.

"Yes, of course, my dear fellow," Felix said and smiled at the butler warmly. "I am Mr Felix Allencourt of Winton House," he went on, immediately perceiving the butler's request just as Georgina had.

"Very good, Sir," the butler said approvingly. "And perhaps I should leave you to introduce your own dear family yourself, Sir?"

“Yes, of course,” Felix said, and Georgina was pleased to see that her father’s cousin seemed to be relaxing. “Thank you kindly.”

When their turn finally came, Georgina thought herself a little nervous. She had never met a Duke before, and despite the fact that he was only a couple of years older than she was, she still felt somewhat intimidated by it all.

“Your Grace,” the butler began with a certain amount of ceremony. “Mr Felix Allencourt.”

“Ah, Mr Allencourt,” the Duke said, turning around fully so that Georgina might study his face for the first time. “I do hope you are well, Sir. And what terribly sad news about dear Garrett Winstanley.”

“Very sad news indeed, Your Grace. I know that I shall miss him terribly, for he was my attorney for a good many years.”

For a moment, Georgina was genuinely amazed. Felix had told her that their paths had crossed but twice before and yet the young man, who undoubtedly had more people to remember than he could possibly manage, had instantly recognized him. She had always imagined that a man of such status and title would be one who barely took in the details of those around him unless they were of some importance to him.

“And these are your family, Mr Allencourt?” the Duke said and looked towards Jeremy, Fleur, and Georgina.

“Yes, this is my son, Jeremy,” Felix said and paused so that the two men might greet each other with a courteous bow. “And this is my daughter, Fleur.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Allencourt. How very nice to make your acquaintance,” the Duke said and bowed.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace,” Fleur said, and it was clear that she was very nervous indeed.

“And this is the daughter of my cousin,” Felix said turning his attention upon Georgina. “Miss Georgina Jeffries.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Jeffries,” the Duke said and stared at her for a moment in a way which almost made her cheeks flush. “How very nice to meet you,” he went on after a brief pause.

“And how very nice to meet you too, Your Grace.” And, as Georgina graciously inclined her head, she had the strangest sensation that the two of them had met before.

Chapter 4

To anybody else present, the Duke of Calder's garden party would certainly have appeared to be a resounding success. And it had been, Emerson knew that much.

And yet it had shaken him to the core of his being and had had an effect on him that he could never have expected.

By the time he had greeted his twentieth group of guests, Emerson had begun to find a certain rhythm to it all. The first few were a little awkward, that much was true, but he knew that he had a certain amount of natural charm, the untaught and unpolished variety that he had always had, and the more he began to relax into his own personality, the easier each greeting became.

Even those who had come agog with curiosity to see the elusive Duke, the young man who had barely been at home most of his life, had begun to seem amusing to him rather than unsettling.

And then Felix Allencourt had introduced the daughter of his cousin, Miss Georgina Jeffries. And the moment he heard her name, the *very* moment he heard her name, all his new-found ease seemed to evaporate. Emerson had felt as if he had slipped through a crack in time and was falling helplessly, his arms flailing wildly as he tried to

retain his composure.

She gave no real indication that she had recognized him at all, barring a momentary narrowing of her gaze that was so brief he still was not entirely sure that he had seen it at all. And her conversation had been such that the initial sense of panic soon left him, even if the feeling of being greatly unsettled did not. And hours later as he stared at the firelight dancing on the crystal of the whisky decanter, that feeling seemed to oscillate. One moment he felt the relief that he was certain she did not know him and the next, all he could do was imagine the ramifications if the realization of who he really was ever dawned on her.

His sudden shock had loosened his tongue, and he had begun to chatter to Georgina Jeffries as if it would somehow prove to her that she could not possibly know him.

“Tell me, Miss Jeffries, are you staying with Mr Allencourt and his family?”

“Yes, I arrived a little over a fortnight ago, Your Grace.”

“And where is home to you ordinarily, Miss Jeffries?” As he continued to talk, he was aware of Felix Allencourt’s daughter, Fleur, studying him closely.

No doubt the young lady thought that he had taken an instant liking to her visiting cousin, and why would she not? After all, Georgina Jeffries had grown into a most beautiful young woman.

“I live in on the edge of a little town called Horley in Hertfordshire, Your Grace.”

“And how do you like Devonshire, Miss Jeffries?” Emerson had felt his mouth go dry, yet he seemed unable to stop talking.

He knew he ought really to be paying equal attention to the rest of her family, but his sense of panic had created an urgency within him to convince the young lady that he was a stranger to her, an interested stranger who had no idea where she came from.

“I like it very much indeed, Your Grace. And to be staying in a beautiful place which is so close to the sea is a great treat for me. There are rivers and lakes aplenty in Hertfordshire, but I think there is nothing to compare to the sight and sound of waves rolling in.”

“I am in complete agreement, Miss Jeffries, but I am biased.” He laughed and was pleased to see that she smiled warmly without any hint of suspicion. “But I am sure that Hertfordshire is a fine county indeed.”

“Indeed, it is, Your Grace.”

“And how long will you be staying in this part of the world, Miss Jeffries?”

“It is rather open-ended, Your Grace.”

“Yes, Miss Jeffries is here taking the wonderful Devonshire air so that she might recover from an illness she suffered lately,” Felix Allencourt added helpfully.

“Oh dear, I hope you are recovering well?”

“Very well indeed, thank you. In truth, I am very much back to my old self, although my dear cousins are very attentive nonetheless.”

“I am sure that they are very glad to have you here,” he said and finally found himself able to turn away and include Fleur and Jeremy Allencourt in the conversation.

“I am very pleased to have her here, Your Grace,” Fleur said warmly, and he thought it likely that she was a nice young woman indeed.

“As am I, Your Grace.” Jeremy Allencourt, a man of his own age who was handsome and fair, smiled amiably. “It is always better to have two women in the house chastising you than simply one.”

“Indeed, I am sure that is true.” For a moment, Emerson had found himself able to relax and laugh with the pleasing young man.

He was grateful to him for easing the tension for a moment and providing him with some respite, a tiny slice of time in which to order his thoughts a little better and be certain to keep his countenance in check.

Emerson had been grateful to see his butler hovering a few feet away as the group of people gathered to be greeted by the Duke of Calder had greatly increased. He realized that he had been speaking to the Allencourt party for some time, perhaps devoting a little too much attention to them as compared with everybody else in attendance.

“Well, you must enjoy your afternoon and the fine weather we seem to be blessed with today,” Emerson said in a sort of polite dismissal that he was not at all comfortable with.

He had never really been comfortable with much of what went along with being such a titled man, and it did not seem at all right to behave that way with Georgina Jeffries. It felt so false.

The rest of his greetings seemed to drift by in a haze of indistinct chatter, as all the while Emerson let his attention stray this way and that just to see where she was.

It was almost as if he could not quite believe he had seen her, not to mention the fact that she had appeared not to recognize him. Every time he looked, he fully expected her to be looking back at him, her face full of recollection of the boy who had once lived in her house.

Emerson sighed and poured himself another large whisky, settling back into the heavy armchair that he had drawn up to the fire. He looked and felt dishevelled, with his tailcoat thrown carelessly over the back of the chair and his blue waistcoat hanging open. He had untied the necktie of his shirt and let it hang loosely down over the top of his unbuttoned waistcoat.

He ran his hand through his thick hair and could feel that it had given up its attempt at neat ash-brown order and had returned to its ordinarily unruly state.

Emerson took a hearty gulp of the whisky and knew that he had already taken too much; his head would be thick and cloudy the next day, and he would regret taking on so much alcohol. But that concern was for tomorrow.

As the alcohol began to take the edge off his concerns, Emerson realized that there was another reason why he had spent the rest of the garden party with one eye on Georgina Jeffries. In all his one and twenty years, Emerson Lockhart knew that Georgina Jeffries had indeed been his only real friend.

It was true that he had not seen her for more than a decade, but her kindness and care when they were children was something that he had never forgotten, despite his best efforts to adhere to his father's advice of retraining his mind to believe in a different past altogether.

Georgina or *Georgie* as he had called her back then, was the only person he had ever missed when he had been taken away that night by Garrett Winstanley; ripped out of one world and neatly inserted into another.

He had been but eleven years old the last time he had seen her, and she just nine. But she had been a clever, quick-witted little girl, one with a big heart and the courage to use it wisely. She had defied the awful old woman, the one he had a recollection was her grandmother, to befriend the boy who was nothing more than a servant in her house.

But he also remembered that Georgie, like him, seemed always to be alone. They were the only children in that great house, and they were of an age to make natural friends.

It seemed to him that so much had happened since then, so many changes had occurred in his young life, that he could hardly remember much of what had gone before. And when he added in his father's version of events, the things he must practice until he believed

them himself, it all became much more confusing.

But Emerson was sure he could remember Georgie finding herself in trouble on more than one occasion for spending too much time with the boy who helped out in the stables, cleaned the boots and shoes, and took on whatever little tasks the housekeeper set him to.

And he remembered how it felt every time Georgie returned to him, even when he thought that her grandmother had chastised her so much that she never would. It always filled him with hope somehow, the idea that there might be more people out in the world just like Georgie. People who did not judge or only select their friends from a very narrow group of people.

But what he could not remember was quite how he got to that place in Hertfordshire initially. He knew with certainty that he had been a servant in Georgie's home, and when she had said she had lived on the edge of the small town of Horley, the memory of that name had flooded back with such force he had been absolutely certain that he could only be talking to his old childhood friend.

Emerson wondered if there had been another life before he had arrived at that house in Hertfordshire. And how was it that he had come to be there when his own father had been born and always lived in Devonshire? If only the old Duke had explained that to him when he had asked. After all, it was little enough information for a man to

have about his own origins.

Draining the remaining whisky in the glass and determining not to have any more, Emerson wondered if his own mother had been from Hertfordshire. But whether she was or was not, it could not explain why he had ended up as a servant in the house of people he was sure he did not know or have any connection to.

And yet he remembered being there from a very young age, he was sure. Emerson let out a great sigh and knew that he would have to revisit such memories when his head was much clearer. These were things which had been lashed down beneath a haze of half-truths and outright lies; things which had not been thought of fully for several years.

It would take some work, Emerson knew, but he would have to go back to that time in his head and search for old truths which now might make sense.

And as for Georgie, he really did not know what to do. Although she seemed to be as clever as always, but now with the poise and grace of a grown woman, Emerson realized that he did not really know her anymore. If she *did* find out who he was, what might she do with that information? Would she make it known to all, or would she still be a friend to him and defy the expectations of those around her?

He determined that he would find out more about Georgie; he would gently try to discover if she was still the same person underneath her adult exterior. And he would start with the musical evening at the assembly rooms.

That was the only further piece of information Emerson had gathered after leaving the Allencourt party to make their way into the gardens. When they had bid farewell to their host and had begun to depart for their own carriage at the end of the afternoon, Emerson had overheard Fleur Allencourt telling her cousin that she dearly hoped she would be well enough to attend the assembly rooms when the string quartet was playing.

Emerson rose to his feet and slumped out of the drawing room, slowly heading for the stairs in a less than straight line. Now that he was upright, his head was spinning, and he knew that he would have a most uncomfortable night followed by a most unhealthy morning.

But soon he would be back to his old self and able to think things through properly and decide how best to truly proceed.

Chapter 5

“I promise you that I am quite well, Fleur, really,” Georgina said and smiled as the two women walked arm in arm into the assembly rooms in the little town of Rowley.

Rowley was the closest town to Winton House, and Georgina thought it a wonderful place. It did not have quite as many and varied shops as there were to be found in Horley, but the place was so enchanting and every bit the seaside town that Georgina thought she much preferred it.

The assembly rooms were extraordinarily large given the less dense population on that part of the Devonshire coast. It was nicely set out with an even mixture of wooden panelling and plain cream painted walls. The chandeliers were simple, but many, and the overall effect was of a spacious and well-lit meeting place for the people of the town.

“I know you managed very well at the garden party, Georgina, but it is evening now and very much cooler than it was on that day. Are sure that you are warm enough?” Fleur said with genuine concern.

Although Fleur liked to fuss around her, Georgina did not mind a bit. Her cousin, she was beginning to realize, cared about everyone and

everything in a way that was almost a habit.

“I really am so fortunate to have you to look out for me, Fleur. But it would be wrong of me not to tell you that I am sure that I have not felt so healthy for years. Really, coming here to stay with you and your family seems to have given me a new lease of life entirely. I am sure that I did not feel this content even before I had fallen ill. But at the same time, I do not wish to admit to too much good health or else I shall be sent home to Ashdown Manor and my ever more quiet life.”

“I am sure that Papa would not mind if you stayed forever, Georgina. I know that he is glad to have you here, and it pleases him to see the two of us getting along like sisters. And Jeremy is thrilled to have another person to add to his small audience every day.” Fleur laughed. “So, you must not worry about that. I should wish you to stay for as long as you like.”

“I am so glad because I have already grown very fond of Winton House and everybody in it.”

“Even Great-Aunt Belle?”

“Oh yes, indeed,” Georgina said enthusiastically. “I do not think her at all sharp, Fleur, but I am comparing her to my grandmother who, it must be said, was one of the sharpest and most fearsome women of my acquaintance. As much as I cared for her, she always did frighten

me just a little."

"I suppose at least Aunt Belle is not frightening," Fleur said and laughed enthusiastically.

Georgina and Fleur had been allowed to attend the assembly rooms on their own since it was to be a sedate evening of music performed by a locally renowned string quartet. There was no dancing planned, and the place was already set out with many seats on the floor that would ordinarily have been used by dancers.

Still, it was true that Felix Allencourt was not a strict man, and he trusted both his son and his daughter to be out in the world and behave appropriately whilst always remaining alert to the pitfalls that the society of other people often presented.

As a result, both Jeremy and Fleur were very sensible and capable young people who had the confidence to travel well and adapt easily to varying company. Secretly, Georgina felt a little youthful next to the two of them as if her life had been just a little more sheltered than theirs.

And it had certainly been very much lonelier, that much she knew for sure. And it was that more than anything else which made her determined to get as much out of her stay in Devonshire as she could.

The evening at the assembly rooms was just one more opportunity to meet new people. Although much of the evening would be spent in silence whilst the musicians played, still she knew that there would be time for a little socializing before and after, not to mention during the interval.

As the two cousins walked in and settled themselves down on seats near the back of the room, Georgina could see that there were already a large number of people arrived and seated. And it was with some dismay that she realized that many of the other guests that evening were a good deal older, most of them nearer to her parents' age than her own.

Fleur did not seem to be at all put out by it, but then Georgina thought that Fleur had greater opportunities in her life to spend time in the society of many young people. Georgina herself had only ever had two or three close friends, and so it was when they turned their young minds to thoughts of marriage, Georgina seemed to have lost her entire circle in one fell swoop.

Still, Georgina had decided to make the most of every moment, and so she would. She looked brightly around her as everybody waited in hushed chatter for the musicians to make their way out onto the stage and was surprised to see the Duke of Calder walking in through the wide arched doorway from the entrance lobby.

Once again, Georgina had the curious sensation she knew him from somewhere. She knew, of course, that it could not be so. She had never been to Devonshire before in her life and, between that fine county, Eton, and Oxford, she very much doubted that the Duke had been to Hertfordshire. After all, had he not told her himself that he *believed* Hertfordshire was a fine county? It certainly seemed to her that he had never been there himself.

And as for them having met somewhere else, Georgina knew for certain that *that* could not be true. Her life had centred around Horley and Hertfordshire with the occasional short journeys into London. That truly was the extent of her experience although she had to admit that she had not suffered particularly or even thought about it until she had spent the last weeks with Fleur and Jeremy.

The Duke looked very well indeed that evening, and she surreptitiously kept her eye on the archway as she waited to see what company he would be keeping. When he continued on alone with no companion at all, Georgina was very surprised.

How could it be that a man of such standing would ever find himself short of company? She had the sad feeling she had experienced when she had looked up at so many windows at Calder Hall and wondered how one man might feel to live alone in so great a place.

But why on earth should he be lonely? And why on earth should she

think him so? And, as far as the evening went, perhaps he did not care for company when his purpose was to listen to a musical recital.

“I say, it is the Duke,” Fleur said in a sudden whisper.

“Yes, I had thought as much,” Georgina said hoping to disguise the fact that she had been secretly peering at him for some moments.

“I would not have expected to see him here,” Fleur went on thoughtfully.

“I daresay he enjoys music as much as the next person.” Georgina laughed. “But he does appear to be here alone.”

“I am not so sure, Georgina, I think he is looking for somebody. Look, he is searching the audience, I am sure of it.” Fleur began to search the audience too as if she might, quite by magic, discern who exactly it was the Duke of Calder was looking for.

Georgina, however, continued to surreptitiously study him, marking how well he looked in full black with smart boots and a white shirt. His hair was very much less controlled than it had been at the garden party, and she thought she liked it better that way. And, under the light of so many chandeliers, the soft brown gave up its curious silvery quality. It was not a grey or silver such as an old man’s might be, but something else altogether, and it really was so thick that Georgina

thought she had never seen such a fine head of hair.

When he turned to look at her finally, Georgina almost gasped. He seemed to stand awkwardly for a moment, just looking over at her. And Georgina, for her part, dared not look away and make a fool of herself with some pretense that she either did not recognize him or had not even been looking at him in the first place, for it was simply ridiculous.

After the slightest hesitation, he smiled at her and nodded, and she did the same. And then, surprising her entirely, the Duke of Calder began to make his way over to where Georgina and Fleur were sitting.

“Good evening, Miss Jeffries,” the Duke said and bowed. “And Miss Allencourt, I hope you are well?” he went on, entirely surprising Fleur who had still been fully engrossed with her intention of discovering the object of the Duke’s curiosity.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” the two young women said almost in unison.

“No, please do not stand, it is not necessary,” he said hurriedly and held out a hand to insist that both women keep their seats. “I wonder if I might join you unless you have this seat saved for somebody else?”

“Of course you may join us, Your Grace,” Georgina said hurriedly

when she realized quite how unsettled he seemed to be.

Fleur, for her part, remained mute. It seemed to Georgina that her cousin was almost as nervous as she had been on the first day she had met him at the garden party. Georgina did not feel the same way, greatly sensing the handsome and well-dressed young man who had just taken a seat at her side was not quite as brimming with confidence as she might have imagined a Duke to be.

As far as titles went, the most important that Georgina had ever met was an Earl, and he certainly behaved in a much grander and more arrogant manner than the Duke of Calder. In fact, Emerson Lockhart's behaviour was altogether warmer and much more comfortable, but perhaps that was because he was a very young man for such a title; perhaps austere manners took time to grow into.

"Thank you kindly, for I think we three are the only people in attendance tonight with youth on our side." He chuckled in a way that made Georgina laugh.

There was something a little mischievous about it as if he were a young boy making a sly comment behind his hand and hoping that the adults might not hear.

"Yes, for some reason this evening's music does not seem to have attracted many young people," Georgina agreed.

“I hope you are not too disappointed, Miss Jeffries,” he went on somewhat more sensibly. “I am sure that you might have preferred a much livelier crowd. Unless, of course, more sedate society might suit you a little better whilst you are convalescing.”

“I am really very much better than I was, Your Grace.”

“And were you laid low for a long time, Miss Jeffries?” he went on, and she thought it strange that the Duke should be so attentive to such details as might otherwise be considered minor to a man of his station.

“From Christmas until February really,” she began. “But I am afraid to say that my mother was determined to keep me very much indoors for some time afterwards, and I do not think it particularly contributed to my convalescence. But here I have my freedom, as you see, and I am truly as well as I have ever been.”

“I am very glad to hear it, although I do hope that your sudden burst of health does not mean that you will soon be leaving Devonshire.” He seemed a little awkward again, and something about his declaration felt strangely personal.

Strangely personal because it did not seem at all inappropriate, even though they were barely acquainted.

“As devious as it might seem, I am not yet ready to write to my mother and tell her how well I am.” Georgina smiled conspiratorially.

“Not devious at all, Miss Jeffries. I am sure that your mother would not want you to return too soon at the cost of your recovery.” He smiled with equal mischief, and she felt a sense of a bond between them.

Overall, she felt extraordinarily comfortable in his company, very much at her ease, whereas poor dear Fleur was still struggling with a few nerves and the intimidation of so great a title. But Georgina had to admit that there were moments when she was just a little tongue-tied. It was fleeting, but she was certain that it was because she thought his face so handsome and his thick mop of hair such a draw.

The chatter throughout the audience suddenly died away, and its loss was curiously startling. Georgina looked down towards the front and saw that the musicians had gathered and were ready to begin.

“I hope you enjoy the performance,” the Duke said, leaning in slightly towards her and whispering.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I hope you enjoy the performance also.” She smiled and found herself looking into his pale green eyes for a moment, the chandeliers above giving them the same silvery quality as his hair.

When the music began, it was something of a relief as Georgina could turn her attention away from the man who was such easy and such unsettling company all at once.

Chapter 6

Lady Maud Aston was an ageing widow of a minor baron in Rowley, who lived in a very splendid townhouse which was but minutes from the sea. The view was breathtaking, and Georgina could hardly tear herself away from the drawing room window which was large, no doubt intentionally so that the householder might enjoy the dramatic vista.

The landscape was not quite rugged and not quite rolling either, with just enough drama to make it interesting and just enough softness to make it appealing. The day was warm and bright, and Georgina wished that she could wander off on her own and make her way down to the seafront and smell the salt and seaweed, feel the breeze on her face and the warmth of the sun on her skin. She wanted to listen to that wonderful sound each time the sea receded a little and drew back little pebbles from the sand.

“Are you enjoying the view, Miss Jeffries?”

“Very much, Your Grace.” Georgina had not found it necessary to tear her gaze away from the view to see who was talking to her.

She had recognized his voice immediately, and she had known already that he was in the large drawing room somewhere. For when she and

Fleur had arrived that afternoon for bridge, it was to find Lady Maud Aston in something of an excited and agitated state.

Lady Maud, so Fleur told her, had extended standing invitations to many fine families in and around the little town of Rowley. Naturally, the Duke's household was extended an invite and had been for many years; it was just the way of things. And, as was also the way things, no Duke had ever actually attended.

That was until that very day, the first time that Georgina herself had been in that fine townhouse. Fleur had been wide-eyed the minute Lady Maud had told her of her unexpected visitor.

"He is in the drawing room as we speak; can you imagine it? Heavens, I never did think that my little home would be so blessed." The lady, who was well into her sixties, was pink-cheeked with excitement and breathless with fluster.

"And he has never been here before, Lady Maud?" Fleur said in a whisper as she and Georgina hurriedly removed their cloaks and handed them to the waiting butler.

"No, never. And I spoke to him so briefly at the garden party that I can hardly imagine that he has particularly sought out *my* company. Although, in truth, I did mention it to him at the time and reminded him that he was always welcome here."

“Yes, of course,” Fleur said in a soothing manner as Georgina did what she could to hide her amusement.

She already liked Lady Maud, even though the two of them, under the circumstances, had enjoyed no more than the very briefest of introductions before she had spiralled into excited chatter. Georgina really did like a lady of title who did not walk through the world with a curiously blank expression as if every wonderful thing that happened was not exciting or something to be grateful for, but merely a natural right. No, Lady Maud was most certainly not a woman made in that category.

“And where is he now, Lady Maud?” Fleur said in a whisper.

“He is in the drawing room, my dear. Did I not say? Dear me, I hardly know what I am doing. I think I *did* say, did I not?” the elderly lady said and then took a deep and steadying breath. “But I managed to get him settled without incident, and he is taking tea with my sister-in-law, Mrs Phillips. Thankfully, Mrs Phillips is of a very different disposition to myself, a very steady and calm woman.” It was if Lady Maud was now talking to herself, and she was nodding a little vaguely as she stared into space. “Yes, a very steady and calm woman indeed.”

“My dear Lady Maud, I am sure that the Duke is very well pleased with his company. Mrs Phillips is a very nice lady, not to mention a

superb bridge player, so you did very well to put the two of them together." Fleur reached out, took Lady Maud's hand and patted it, and Georgina felt very touched once again at the kindness her cousin seemed to show to everybody. "What do you say I take you down into the kitchen for a steadying brandy from the cook's larder?"

"Oh yes, what a clever girl you are. After all, I should not like all present in the drawing room to see me helping myself to brandy there, should I?" Lady Maud seemed to be calming a little, and Georgina had no doubt that it was her cousin's influence. "And I must admit, even a little *cooking* brandy would settle my nerves greatly at this moment."

"Then let us make haste." Fleur turned to look at Georgina.

"I shall be quite alright, cousin," Georgina said confidently. "For I can already see that there is a large window in the drawing room I would be very pleased to stare out for a few minutes." She laughed.

"I shall return as soon as possible," Fleur whispered in Georgina's ear before taking Lady Maud's hand and speeding her away in the direction of the servants' staircase.

Georgina, despite many closeted years and lonely hours, never found herself particularly nervous in social settings, and that day was no different.

She did not hesitate to make her way in through the open drawing room door to where so many bridge tables were set out, and so many people were either playing or talking. She did not feel conspicuous for being alone for a few moments but just made her way quietly to the window to enjoy the view.

She had not searched the room as she walked through for any sign of the Duke of Calder, for she already knew that he was there, and she would not have liked him to see her looking for him.

She had been at the window but a few minutes when he made his approach and, although she recognized his voice, she was surprised that he had quitted Mrs Phillips' company so soon. Furthermore, she hoped that in doing so, poor dear Lady Maud would not be thrown into any further turmoil.

"It is a very fine view of the sea, is it not?" the Duke went on, and Georgina turned to look at him, already anticipating his thick silvery brown hair and pale eyes.

"It is a great treat for me, Your Grace," Georgina said truthfully and realized that she was as at ease with him as she had been when the two had sat side-by-side to listen to the string quartet in the assembly rooms just a week before. "You must count yourself very lucky to have grown up in a place that is not landlocked." She smiled at him.

“Yes, I never tire looking at the sea,” he said and turned his attention out through the window. “But I was not always here.”

“You were not?” Georgina said and immediately regretted it.

She did not wish to pry, and she instantly remembered that Fleur had said something about childhood illnesses which had kept him away from home. No doubt he would not be keen to remember such a time in his life.

“Forgive me,” she said hurriedly before he had a chance to answer her. “I had not meant pry.”

“There is no forgiveness required, Miss Jeffries, and I did not suspect you of prying for a moment.” He turned back from the window to look at her and smiled.

It was a warm smile, if a little shy, and it rendered him even more handsome in Georgina’s opinion. But there was something else, something that she once again recognized. He must remind her of somebody, and yet she was sure she did not know another man so handsome or with such a smile.

“That is a relief, for I should not have liked to give offence, Sir.”

“You are such pleasant company, Miss Jeffries, that I cannot imagine

you giving offence to anybody." He laughed. "Unless you absolutely intended it, then I could imagine it entirely."

"Good heavens," she said, somewhat startled.

"Please believe me that that was not intended as an insult, Miss Jeffries. I simply mean to convey that you strike me as a woman possessed of a certain strength and confidence, one who would not lose an argument very often."

"I am still not entirely sure that I should be flattered, Your Grace." Highly amused, Georgina began to laugh.

"If you are not flattered, Miss Jeffries, then I must settle for your amusement."

"Then I assure you that you have that much, Your Grace." Still laughing, she turned to look out of the window again. "I wish I had such a view in Hertfordshire, but I do not."

"I have some very good views of the sea from Calder Hall, but none as close as this and really only from the upper windows on the rear elevation. But Lady Maud has one of the finest views in this very window, I believe."

"Yes, I can quite imagine. But she seems like a nice lady indeed, and I

think such a nice lady deserves such a fine view," Georgina said with warmth, thinking how the presence of the man before her had thrown that pleasant old dear into such a spin.

"I am sure that she is nice, although I think I have unsettled her a little," he said in a whisper.

"I am afraid that you have unsettled her greatly, Your Grace." Georgina smiled at him again. "But in a very fine way, one that the lady will never forget."

"I was surprised, I must admit, that she was so astonished to see me here today," he went on. "After all, she had reminded me of the standing invitation that has existed for some time when I saw her at the garden party."

"Yes, but I suppose she had never imagined for a moment that you would choose to make use of that invitation."

"But why not?" He looked at her with a sudden wide-eyed naivety that she found both surprising and endearing all at once.

"Well, because you are a Duke, Your Grace," Georgina began. "And she no doubt thought that you would have many other fine engagements that you would prefer to fulfil. Trust me, it is quite a natural thing."

“Is it really?” he said and still looked a little confused. “Well, I suppose it is just the sort of thing I ought to get used to.”

“Being a Duke, you mean?”

“Yes, exactly that.” His voice had grown a little vague, and his eyes drifted towards the sea once again.

“I suppose these things come in time, Your Grace,” Georgina said and wondered that he had not been better schooled in such things.

But, of course, if he had done much of his growing up away from Calder Hall, perhaps he did not find his title and position quite as natural as he might have otherwise.

“I daresay I ought to return to Mrs Phillips for a while,” he was whispering again. “She disappeared to have some more tea sent to us both, and then I saw you standing here looking out of the window.”

“Yes, of course, you must return to her,” Georgina said, kindly releasing him from any obligation he might feel.

“Although I think I should much rather continue to stand here with you and look out of the window.” He smiled again, and his pale eyes caught hers for a moment and held them.

“You are very kind.” It was all that Georgina could think of to say, for she felt suddenly a little tongue-tied.

“And perhaps, if you are not otherwise engaged, you might care to partner me for a game of bridge later if you have a mind to play.”

“Yes, I should like that very much, Your Grace.”

“Then I will come and find you when Mrs Phillips releases me properly,” he said and bowed deeply before turning to leave her.

As Georgina watched him leave, she thought what a very appealing man he was. With or without his title, Emerson Lockhart was very comfortable company, almost like an old friend. She could not imagine feeling so with any other Duke in all of England and wondered why it was she was not at all intimidated by him.

As she looked around the room, Georgina could see many young ladies allowing their gaze to stray in his direction as he regained his seat on a small couch opposite Mrs Phillips. He was very handsome, with his hair still looking a little unruly, but his dress immaculate. He was wearing largely brown, a colour which entirely suited his hair and complexion.

But despite his handsomeness, Georgina wondered how many young

ladies present would be trying to catch his eye if he were not the Duke of Calder. Perhaps all, perhaps none.

“My dear Georgina, I am beginning to think that the Duke has a liking for you,” Fleur said in an excited whisper.

“Oh, Fleur,” Georgina said, startled out of her reverie.

“Forgive me, I did not mean to come upon you so suddenly,” Fleur said and began to laugh.

“No, no, I am quite alright. Do not fear, you will not need to hurry me down below stairs and pour me a glass of cooking brandy.” Georgina smiled. “Tell me, is Lady Maud faring a little better?”

“Yes, very much better.” Fleur’s pretty blue eyes danced, and Georgina knew that the whole thing had amused her greatly. “Although I do nurse a hope that so large a serving brandy will not render her a little wobbly later on.”

“Thank heavens for Mrs Phillips.”

“And for you, apparently, for to return to my original thought, the Duke does seem to have an interest in you.” Fleur’s tone had become gossipy, and she looked at her cousin expectantly.

“I must admit that I was quite surprised when he joined me at the window. But, apparently, Mrs Phillips had gone to request some more tea for them both, leaving him alone.”

“So, he did not waste a moment in coming to speak with you.” Fleur looked excited.

“I think he was just pleased to see a friendly face, somebody who perhaps he did not have to try quite so hard for,” Georgina said thoughtfully.

“Yes, I must admit that the two of you do seem at your ease together.”

“And I do not think him as comfortable in the role of Duke as he might be.”

“No, perhaps not.” Fleur had narrowed her gaze in thought.

“For why else would he have come here today to fulfil such a small standing invitation? Perhaps the little events might help him get used to the larger ones.”

“Or perhaps he had hoped to see *you* here, Georgina,” Fleur said, and her pretty blue eyes widened at the thought of it.

Chapter 7

When the invitation was received, all of Winton House seemed to fall into a wonderful, excited sort of turmoil. Fleur seemed almost fit to burst with all manner of observations that she could not possibly make to Georgina with the family present.

And Felix himself seemed pleasantly upended by the whole thing, talking more than usual and a good deal faster.

“Well, I suppose we did spend a fair amount of time in conversation with His Grace at the garden party,” Felix said in a hearty tone as if he was trying to take the whole thing in his stride. “But still, for us to be invited to Calder Hall for afternoon tea is quite a thing, girls, is it not? And what do you say, Jeremy?”

“I am very pleased to be invited, Father, but I cannot begin to imagine that *I* am the reason for such an invite,” he said and looked at his sister and then Georgina. “I daresay it is one of these very fine-looking creatures.”

“Jeremy, behave!” Fleur said although her attempted chastisement fell victim to her own excitement and pleasure at the invitation.

“I do hope my sister and my cousin are not about to fall out over a

man, even if he is a Duke," Jeremy went on, clearly enjoying his opportunity to tease much more than he enjoyed the idea of the invitation. "For they have been getting along as sisters, and I should hate to see a man come between them, even if he is the most powerful man in the county."

"Well, if the Duke of Calder has an inclination towards either Fleur or Georgina, you must do nothing to upset it, Jeremy." Felix laughed. "What man in his right mind would not think them the most beautiful women in the world."

"Oh, Papa." Fleur giggled excitedly. "But I do not think it is *me* that the Duke is interested in." Her excitement had led her to be a little garrulous.

"Ah, so it is the beautiful Miss Jeffries." Jeremy smiled broadly and bowed deeply in his cousin's direction. "And very natural too."

"Well, your visit here to Winton House is certainly turning out to be eventful, Georgina." Felix laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "And I am pleased that you do not bend and certainly do not break in the face of my son's perpetual teasing."

"Not at all, Sir. Jeremy is a pussycat really," she said and held Jeremy's gaze, humorously challenging him.

“I am, my dear.” Jeremy was still highly amused. “All teeth and claws, Georgina.”

“All fur and laziness more like,” Fleur added.

“What is all this excitement?” Mirabelle Allencourt, or Great-Aunt Belle as she was known to all, walked sedately into the drawing room.

There really was a strong resemblance to Georgina’s grandmother, Elizabeth, except that Mirabelle was plumper, and her face had a very pleasing softness.

Elizabeth Allencourt, or Lady Elizabeth Jeffries, the Baroness, as she had become, had been angular in all respects now that Georgina came to compare her to her sister.

It had always been clear to Georgina that her grandmother was neither maternal nor did she have a fondness for her only grandchild. She seemed always to be more concerned with appearances than anything else, always determined that the Jeffries family name should be well respected and protected.

Georgina could not remember a single moment of warmth passing between herself and her grandmother, although she had never particularly mourned its loss. Her own mother had warmth enough to sustain Georgina, and so she had treated her grandmother as someone

to be more or less avoided, particularly as a child.

“We have been invited to take afternoon tea with the Duke at Calder Hall,” Felix said brightly as he rushed to take his aunt’s arm and guide her into the most comfortable of the heavy brocade covered armchairs near the fire. “What do you say to that, Aunt Belle?”

“I say that is quite surprising, my dear Felix,” she said with a little groan as she settled her rotund frame down into the chair. “But delightful, I am sure.”

“And it is but two days away, so we have something very fine to look forward to Aunt Belle, do we not?” Felix strode across the room to the drinks cabinet and quickly poured his aunt a rather generous helping of sherry.

“Oh dear, I am not expected to go, am I?” Mirabelle said and reached up to take the sherry with a smile.

“Well, you are certainly invited,” Felix began. “For the invitation is to the Allencourt family and Miss Georgina Jeffries.”

“But I am sure that the Duke likely intends the invitation for those of the Allencourt family he met at his garden party.” Mirabelle took a dainty sip of the sherry.

“Would you not like to go, Aunt Belle?”

“I am too old to get excited about Dukes, my dear boy. Even mysterious ones.”

“Mysterious ones, Great Aunt?” Fleur said and hastened to perch on the couch opposite Mirabelle.

“Child, you are quite the nosiest young woman I have ever encountered,” Mirabelle said with a hearty laugh. “One little hint of gossip, and you sprint across the room as if you were a fox chasing a hen.”

“Stop teasing, Auntie Belle,” Fleur said in such a loving and amused tone that Georgina was taken aback.

She would never have enjoyed such an open and warm exchange with her own grandmother and wondered at the great differences that could exist between two sisters. Mirabelle really was a very different woman from her sister, Elizabeth.

“Well, what is so mysterious about a Duke you have never met, Great-Aunt Belle?” Fleur went on undeterred.

“I do not think the young man himself mysterious, at least I do not think he is. After all, as you rightly point out my dear, I have never

met him."

"Then what is mysterious?" Fleur went on, and Georgina stifled a laugh as she began to imagine her cousin chasing a hen across the drawing room.

"I think his very presence is just mysterious, my dear."

"His presence? Why?" Fleur continued.

"Felix, *do* get your daughter a glass of sherry. It might calm her excitement a little," Mirabelle said teasingly. "And why are you so excited about it all, Fleur? Tell me you are not hoping for a proposal already?"

"Stop teasing me," Fleur said brightly. "And no, I am not hoping for a proposal. Well, not one made to me, at any rate."

"Then my other great-niece has caught the eye of this young man, has she?" Mirabelle turned her attention on Georgina.

She was squinting at her a little, and so Georgina moved across the drawing room to take a seat on the couch so that Mirabelle might study her more closely.

"Perhaps Fleur is teasing you, Aunt Belle," Georgina said warmly. "For

I do not believe for a moment that the Duke has invited your family to his home on my account."

"And why not, young lady?" Mirabelle said and fixed her with a curiously warm scowl.

"Well, I have seen him only three times, and I cannot think that we spoke for more than a few minutes on each occasion. Although we did play a hand of bridge."

"I think your modesty rather suits you, my dear." Mirabelle was still peering at her closely. "But I am inclined to agree with the rest of the family that there is a very healthy chance that you would appeal to such a fine gentleman. You are very beautiful, of course. All women with Allencourt blood are." She nodded vigorously. "But there is something in your character which sets you a little apart, my dear. A little self-sufficiency, perhaps?"

"I am a little self-sufficient, Aunt Belle. After all, I have spent a good deal of time in my own company, and not just of late whilst I have been unwell."

"And why is that?" Mirabelle did not show any sign that she was embarrassed by her own prying.

"Because my family lives a little out of the way, and I did not make a

great number of friends as a child. I think children with brothers and sisters tend to be the recipients of invites rather more than lone children. Not that I mean to feel sorry for myself, Aunt Belle, for I do not. But I did live very quietly, and the few friends I do have are not so close to me that they have had a moment's trouble in wiping me from their thoughts in their sudden search for husbands."

"I daresay that is a phenomenon which plays itself out up and down the country, my dear," Mirabelle said and laughed heartily. "But I do not think I have heard the sentiment so very well put. Well done, Georgina."

"Thank you kindly, Aunt Belle," Georgina said, thoroughly enjoying the praise which she thought the elderly lady bestowed but rarely.

"My dear Felix, I think you will manage this little afternoon excursion very well without me. After all, you have a very lively little party to take with you, and I think that the Duke of Calder will have enough on his hands with Georgina, without her *Great-Aunt Belle* confusing things."

"As you wish," Felix said with an indulgent laugh.

When the time came to actually attend that afternoon engagement just two days later, Georgina felt a little nervousness that she had not been expecting. She had come to think of the Duke of Calder more than

once in the intervening days and could not help harbouring a secret hope that it really *had* been on her account that she and her family had been invited.

But she also thought that the addition of dear old Mirabelle Allencourt would have been a very welcome one. She was amusing in the way that elderly ladies often were, given that they were no longer trying to impress either potential suitors or their peers of middle age, and cared little what others thought of them. That sort of *sporting* old lady was always a great comfort in a new social setting.

“You seem a little quiet, Georgina,” Fleur whispered into her ear as they walked arm in arm towards the huge stone steps which led into Calder Hall.

“If I am honest, I think I am a little nervous,” Georgina said, also whispering as she carefully eyed Felix and Jeremy, who walked ahead of them.

“I hope it is not down to me and all the silly things I said.”

“What silly things?”

“I ought not to have voiced my opinion that Emerson Lockhart has a liking for you. I should have thought before I spoke and not done so much to add pressure to you on such a day, my dear.”

“You have done nothing to add pressure, Fleur. In fact, you are a comfort as always.”

“How kind, Georgina.” Fleur squeezed her arm. “And how beautiful you look today. That gown suits you very well indeed.”

“Thank you, Fleur. You look very beautiful too, as always.”

Georgina had picked a gown which was neither too ostentatious nor too plain. It was in a thick dark ivory cotton with small green flowers all over it, giving the impression from afar that the gown was pale green.

There was a wide satin band in pale green around the Empire line beneath the bust, and Fleur’s maid had curled her pale blonde hair to perfection, piling it high on her head.

Mr Murray, the Duke’s butler, was already waiting for the small party at the top of the steps. He pulled the door open wide and held out an arm to indicate that they should enter.

“Good afternoon, Mr Allencourt,” the butler said with some warmth. “His Grace is ready to receive you in the drawing room.”

As they walked into the grand entrance, Georgina almost gasped. The

entrance hall alone was almost as large as half her father's house, and she could hardly believe that such places existed.

There was an immense staircase leading up to an open first-floor landing, creating quite a gallery above them. The ceilings were extraordinarily high, and Georgina could not help looking up in wonder.

All around the entrance hall hung great portraits of Dukes and Duchesses past, of children and their pet dogs and of the beautiful landscape of the grounds themselves. There were rich mahogany tables, each of which carried great vases of the most beautiful, vibrant flowers. There were so many that the scent was quite heady, and Georgina felt a little overwhelmed.

A small team of maids and footmen were waiting in the entrance hall, all ready to help the party off with their cloaks and bonnets and hats. Georgina had never been received in such a fashion in all her life, and she knew that she would never forget the experience.

"If you'll follow me, ladies and gentlemen," the butler said when they were all ready to move on.

Georgina walked into the drawing room with the same sense of wonder, thinking that it must be several times the size of the drawing room back home at Ashdown Manor. Although the walls were heavily

panelled in dark oak, the windows were so large and the room so big that it did not seem at all imposing, but rather light and airy.

“Good afternoon, Mr Allencourt,” the Duke said, hurriedly rising to his feet and bowing to her father’s cousin. “I hope you are well.”

“Very well, Your Grace, I thank you,” Felix said and bowed with equal depth.

“And how nice to see you again, Master Allencourt.” The Duke smiled warmly at Jeremy who bowed and, mercifully, seemed set to behave himself for a while.

“Miss Allencourt, are you well?” Emerson Lockhart turned his attention upon Fleur.

“I am very well, Your Grace,” she said and bobbed neatly.

“And Miss Jeffries,” he said with a familiarity of tone that seemed to quietly take the whole family aback. “I am still reeling from our success at the bridge tables.” He laughed and turned to Felix. “Your cousin’s daughter is a very fine player, and I am certain that I would not have won a single hand in Lady Aston’s drawing room without her assistance.”

“Yes, she is indeed a very smart young woman,” Felix said and seemed

to appreciate the compliment on her behalf.

All in all, they spent a very comfortable afternoon. The Duke seemed to be at his ease with the Allencourt family, and he had laid on an exceptional afternoon tea for them all.

Whilst he engaged them all equally, Georgina could not help thinking that she had, perhaps, garnered just a little more attention from him than the rest. She began to wonder if he really did have an interest in her and, if she was honest, the idea of it was quite thrilling.

She thought that she had never met a man with such a pleasing disposition, not to mention such a handsome face and that wonderful, unruly hair. And there was, of course, that ever-growing sense of familiarity, a sense that she could not entirely put down to their three previous meetings. It was something more than that, and yet she could not quite put her finger on it.

When the afternoon was over, and the family was being helped back into their cloaks and hats in the entrance hall, Emerson Lockhart had followed them out to bid them farewell. But he had saved his farewell to Georgina for last, keeping her back just a moment as the rest of her party began to descend the stone steps towards their waiting carriage.

“I have had a very pleasant afternoon, Miss Jeffries, and I thank you kindly for coming.”

“I have had a very fine afternoon too, Your Grace,” she said and inclined her head graciously in farewell before turning to make her own way down the steps.

When she heard him following along behind her and saw him stoop to retrieve something from the steps, she realized that she must have dropped one of her thin gloves from the pocket of her cloak. Just as she was about to turn to look at him fully and take the glove back, he quietly spoke to stop her.

“Georgie,” he said, and she spun around to look at him. “Forgive me.” He faltered for a moment. “*Miss Jeffries*, you dropped your glove,” he went on hurriedly, clearly realizing what he had said. “You must not leave without it, for I think the evening will draw down a little chilly.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said and, with a trembling hand, took the glove from him.

Although she realized that she would soon have to move since the rest of the party would almost be in the carriage by now, Georgina could not help but stand and stare at him for a moment.

Georgie, he had called her *Georgie*; she was sure he had. She studied his strong, handsome features and noted the look of consternation on his face.

Could it really be him? But how *could* it be?

She looked at his eyes and his nose and his chin, suddenly desperate to find a feature that she recognized. But she was trying to compare a fully-grown man to a young boy and trying to do so through the haze of many intervening years.

Surely it was not him, for how could it possibly be? And yet she had only ever known one person in all the world to call her Georgie. That person had not been Emerson Lockhart, surely.

The person who had called her Georgie so many years ago was Samuel White, and dear little *Sammy* had certainly not been heir to the Duchy of Calder.

Chapter 8

Georgina had kept to her own chamber for much of the next day, claiming a trifle of a headache that would soon be over, she was sure.

Fleur had been wonderfully attentive, and not so easy to persuade that the malady was a simple one which would undoubtedly be short-lived. But, after much promising that she would pull the bell in her chamber for assistance if she needed it, Georgina was finally left alone for a while, taking advantage of much-needed time in which to order her thoughts.

It was true that she had a very sleepless night thinking about it all, but she had come to no conclusion whatsoever. All she could do was think about her old friend, a boy she still thought of with sadness so many years later.

Georgina had grown up knowing that Sammy was there and had seemed always to have been there. He was the only other child in Ashdown Manor, although he did not live above stairs as she did. Sammy was a servant, a child who had been orphaned as a baby and had somehow made his way into the home of her father, Lord Jeffries, the Baron.

As a child, Georgina had never asked for any further details, and as an

adult, it had never occurred to her to seek such information. At the time, she had simply enjoyed her friendship for what it was, as children are want to do.

She did not allow the divisions of class to keep them apart, for in Samuel White lay her only hope of assuaging the loneliness she had not yet been old enough to even name, let alone recognize. All Georgina knew then was that she was very much happier in Sammy's company than she was without it.

Sammy was a stable boy, and her first recollections of him were greatly centred around her father's stables. He was very good with the horses, even though he was so tiny. Or at least he had been tiny then when Georgina was but five or six, and he just a year or two older. But he had that curious confidence in practical matters that seemed to be the way of servants, and Georgina had always been very impressed by it.

She often wished that she would be allowed to stay below stairs with Sammy, the two of them stifling their giggles as they crept into the kitchen to steal a biscuit or a piece of warm bread or anything else that the cook might have freshly baked.

And they knew with that extra sense that small children have that the dear woman was perfectly well aware of their little acts of thievery, and any attempt to chastise them for it was always done in such a

warm way that they knew she did not mind at all.

The cook had always been very fond of Sammy, making sure that there was plenty of clearing up for him to do in the kitchen when the weather turned cold. Georgina had always known that Mrs Townley was kindly and had easily seen that she had a great fondness for the little boy.

As they grew a little older, Georgina's grandmother was less and less tolerant when it came to the friendship that was developing between the children. She often gave the strictest of instructions to Georgina's governess that the young woman should not take her eye off the child for a moment, or she would be bound to hasten below stairs to seek out the urchin who she ought really to stay away from.

But Georgina's need for a friend was so great and her care for Samuel White so deep that she often found spirited ways to get around her grandmother.

She had even once feigned a little illness so that her governess would allow her to go to bed for a while and then, as soon as she thought herself alone, she had crept through the house and made her way out to the stables where Sammy was.

He was brushing a horse, a large horse who was one of her father's favourites, and she watched with interest as he continued in his

duties.

“Do you want a go?” Sammy had said as he proffered the grooming brush. “I can tell that you want to. You needn’t worry; it’s easy.”

“Really? But do you think the horse will mind?”

“A horse doesn’t mind as long as he’s being brushed by somebody who isn’t scared of him,” Sammy had said with a chuckle and took her hand, placing her palm flat on the wooden back of the brush and fastening the strap over the top. “Go on then,” he said and watched with interest as she advanced upon the horse and tentatively reached out with the brush.

Immediately the brush made contact with the horse, he began to pad at the stable floor with his front hooves.

“He does not like me, Sammy,” Georgina said, her little heart pounding.

“He *does* like you, silly.” Samuel laughed. “He can just tell that you’re scared. If you’re scared, he will be scared. Do it like this,” Sammy said and took hold of her wrist, laying the brush with greater pressure against the horse’s flank and drawing her hand down firmly. “You see?”

Georgina had felt the horse relax almost immediately, and she quickly got the hang of things. She was enjoying a pastime that was not learning something of little interest to her delivered by a governess whose enthusiasm was less than infectious.

“Aren’t you supposed to be somewhere, Georgie?” Sammy said as she became more and more engrossed in her occupation.

“Not really, I told the governess that I did not feel well.”

“And she let you come outside?”

“No, she put me to bed.”

“Did you sneak out here, Georgie?” he said excitedly.

“Yes, I did.”

“Well, you had better sneak back in again.” His tone changed a little.

“Why? I do not want to.”

“You might have to in a minute, look,” he said and raised his head to peer out of the stable door.

Striding towards them with a face like thunder was none other than

Lady Elizabeth Jeffries herself. It was clear that she had seen Georgina brushing the horse and so she realized there was little point in casting aside the brush and pretending otherwise now.

“Georgina, what on earth are you doing?”

“I am brushing the horse, Grandmama,” Georgina had said simply.

“You will not answer me back,” Lady Elizabeth was clearly furious.

“I did not answer back, Grandmama. I just *answered*. You did ask me a question, after all,” Georgina said simply and heard Sammy stifling a laugh.

“Get away,” Lady Elizabeth said as she advanced into the stable and shooed Sammy away from her granddaughter. “Go on, move!” she said, her face pinched in an expression that suggested that there was something incredibly unpleasant about the young stable boy.

At that moment, Georgina had felt like crying. Her grandmother was shooing her friend away as if he was covered in lice and dirt, and it hurt her heart.

What was worse, she knew that Sammy had perceived exactly the same thing, and he looked crestfallen and ashamed in front of his only friend.

“Please do not do that, Grandmama. Sammy is my friend.”

“He is not your friend, you stupid girl,” Lady Elizabeth said with a snarl. “He is a servant and an orphan, he is *nothing*.”

“He is not *nothing*, Grandmama; he is a person. He is just like you and me.”

“He is *nothing* like us, Georgina Jeffries. And I have told you before that I do not wish you to consort with him. He is just a servant, and he will never be anything better than that. But you are the daughter of a baron, a very fine young lady, and you should remember that.”

“But I am not a fine young lady, Grandmama. I am a girl. I am not yet ten years old, and Sammy is my friend.”

“He is not your friend; I have told you already.”

“He is my friend, and it does not matter how many times you tell me he is not because he is. I like Sammy better than anybody in this house, and I always shall.”

“Do not raise your voice at me, young lady,” Lady Elizabeth had said in a low and dangerous voice. “Do not disobey me. You are not to speak to this servant again.”

“I will!” Georgina said defiantly. “I do not care what you say, Grandmama, I will always be Sammy’s friend.”

Within a breath of her finishing her sentence, Georgina had been startled by an incredibly hard slap across her face. Her own grandmother had struck her in frustration and struck her harder than she ought to have done. In truth, the blow almost sent Georgina backward.

“No, leave her alone!” Sammy said and was suddenly back with them.

Georgina realized that he had heard every word of their exchange, and the tears began to roll down her face. Sammy was her best friend in the world, and she would not want him to think that she thought of him as nothing more than a servant, a *nobody*. He was everything to her, and she decided that she would never show her grandmother another moment’s love as long as they both lived.

“Havers,” Lady Elizabeth called to the stable master. “Take this child away before I return him to the orphanage where he ought to have been left years ago.” And then she turned to look at Sammy. “And you need not look at me like that, young man. After all, had it not been for my kindness, you would have grown up in very different circumstances. Children like you do not fare well in this world, and you should remember that. What is more, you should be grateful to

me, not defiant as you seem to be."

"Come on, lad," Havers said and gently led Sammy away.

Georgina had known that her punishment would not only be severe but would likely be very lonely indeed. She was sure that she would be banished to her own chamber for a good long while but knew that she would survive it. And not only that, but as soon as she was free, she would seek Sammy out and tell him that he would always be her friend. She would tell him that she loved him much better than she loved her grandmother, that was certain.

When Georgina came to the end of her recollection, tears were streaming down her face. When Sammy had disappeared without trace just a few months later, the young Georgina had been truly heartbroken. Try as she might, she had never found any evidence that Sammy still lived and breathed on the earth, and it had always played on her mind, even as a fully-grown woman.

But had he really gone so far away? Could the Samuel White she had known all those years ago really have made it all the way to Devonshire and a life so different from the one he had that it truly seemed impossible?

But why on earth, if it was not so, would the Duke of Calder have referred to her as *Georgie*? Any man in polite society would not even

have referred to her as *Georgina*, especially when they were so barely acquainted.

But for a Duke to have done it, for a Duke to have addressed her so informally, seemed almost as impossible as the idea that Sammy White could have come so far.

And there was, of course, the question of the ease between them, that immediate feeling she had of recognition when she had first seen him up close at the garden party at Calder Hall. The feeling had been not only memorable but had been repeated at every meeting. But could that really account for it? Was she so at ease with Emerson Lockhart because he was, either then or in the past, really Samuel White?

One way or another, Georgina Jeffries intended to find out.

Chapter 9

“Fleur, may I speak with you?” Georgina said the following morning when she popped her head around Fleur’s chamber door.

After another sleepless night, Georgina knew that she must do something. She had fully decided to go to the Duke of Calder and speak to him face-to-face on the matter, for there was nothing else for it. But she quickly realized that she would not be able to absent herself from the family at Winton house without causing a great deal of concern, and even suspicion.

In the end, there was nothing else for her to do but take Fleur into her confidence and hope that she would help her to get to the Duke without any of the family being aware of it.

“Yes, of course. Do come in, Georgina.” Fleur smiled brightly as she ushered her cousin in.

Fleur’s chamber was small but pretty. It was the first time that Georgina realized why her cousin had picked such a small room for herself; it caught the very best of the early morning sunshine.

The room was so full of sunshine that it looked almost yellow, although Georgina knew it to be predominantly pale cream.

It was not only well lit by the sun but seemed somehow able to capture that peculiar quality of light that is unmistakably morning. For all the wonderful view that Georgina had of the lake and the daffodils, there was something about the morning sunshine in Fleur's chamber that seemed to do something to the inner being.

"Are you feeling better, Georgina? How is your head?"

"Oh, my head is greatly improved, thank you."

"I am bound to say that you look very concerned about something. Tell me, what is troubling you?"

"How very perceptive you are, cousin, for something troubles me greatly."

"Come and sit down by the window, my dear, and tell me," Fleur said, taking her cousin's hand and leading her over to the broad window seat where the two women sat side-by-side but facing one another.

"Before I begin, Fleur, I must swear you to absolute secrecy."

"Of course, my dear. Believe me, anything you wish to tell me will be closely guarded."

“I am sure that I need not have said it, and I apologize if I have caused any offence, Fleur. But believe me when I tell you that this is a matter of such seriousness that I cannot begin to comprehend the ramifications if it is all found out.”

“Goodness me, you have me on a piece of string.” Fleur’s blue eyes were wide. “Really, I think that I am perhaps a little frightened.”

“There is no need to be frightened, Fleur.” Georgina laughed a little. “Although I cannot blame you, for it seems that I have built the thing up to such a degree. Perhaps I ought to get straight to the telling of it all instead of teasing you any further.”

“Yes, just tell me,” Fleur said.

“You must forgive me for the length of this tale, but it is necessary to begin many years ago when I was a child for you to understand the full thing.”

“Yes, alright.”

“When I was a girl, there was a young boy who lived at Ashdown Manor. He was not a part of the family, rather he was a servant. He sometimes worked in the stables and sometimes in the kitchen, not having a particular role because of his youth. I do not know when he first came into our home, except that I always remember him being

there."

"What was his name?" Fleur said quietly.

"His name was Samuel White. I always called him Sammy because our cook, Mrs Townley, always called him Sammy. We were great friends, Fleur."

"Oh, how very lovely," Fleur said genuinely. "But that is the way with children, is it not? They do not see the divisions."

"No, they do not. And I most certainly did not see any divisions between myself and Sammy. We were quite isolated at Ashdown Manor, and I did not have any other friends but Sammy. My mother and father did not make any complaint about it, and I am sure that my mother was simply pleased that I was not made lonely by my isolation. My grandmother had the strongest objections to it all, always seeking to disrupt any game that Sammy and I were playing. She was most intent that we should not be friends, and she never wasted an opportunity to remind us both that Sammy was nothing more than a servant."

"I am bound to say that your grandmother would appear to have been extraordinarily harsh. I do not wish to offend, but I cannot imagine great Aunt Belle ever having behaved in such a way."

“You do not offend me at all, and you are quite right. I can hardly believe that my grandmother and great Aunt Belle were sisters, they are so very different. It is true that both would seem possessed of a disposition to speak their minds freely, but it is the contents of those minds that strike me as so very different.”

“Does Sammy still work at Ashdown Manor now?”

“No, he has not been there for many, many years. He disappeared quite suddenly when he was eleven years old and I but nine. It was never properly explained to me where he went or why, he simply was not there one day, and I never saw him again.”

“Could he not have run away?”

“Yes, I was certainly told that *that* was the most likely explanation.”

“By your grandmother?”

“No, my mother and father. By that time, my mother had already passed away, just a few weeks before.”

“But do you have any reason to think that Sammy did *not* run away? That something else became of him?”

“I do now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Fleur, I am as certain as I can be that I have seen Sammy again. He is a fully-grown man now, obviously, and there have been the changes which come along with such growth. But I was certain that I had seen the man somewhere before, that I knew him. And now I am sure.”

“But where? Do you mean here in Devonshire?”

“Yes, although I am bound to say that you will think me a little deranged when I tell you the identity of the man I suspect of being my old friend.”

“You must not leave me in suspense a moment longer, cousin, you must tell me.”

“I firmly believe that the Duke of Calder, Emerson Lockhart, is my old friend and former servant, Samuel White,” Georgina said and winced a little, realizing just how ridiculous it sounded out loud.

“The Duke of Calder?” Fleur said, her mouth remaining open when she had finished speaking.

“I know, I know. I realize that this sounds perfectly ridiculous, and you must think me the most dreadfully fanciful person on the earth,

but I truly believe it."

"But why do you believe it? Is it some scar or mark of youth that is still carried by the man? What has convinced you so absolutely?"

"It was something he said."

"But what?"

"When we went to afternoon tea at Calder Hall, I once again had that curious feeling that I knew the Duke from somewhere but could not quite place him. In truth, I have had it at every meeting, although I have dismissed it time and again. But as we were leaving Calder Hall, as we were descending the stone steps, I dropped one of my gloves out of the pocket of my cloak, and the Duke stooped down to retrieve it. He called me by name quite by instinct, I believe, and that was when I knew."

"He called you by name? What do you mean?"

"He called me *Georgie,*" Georgina said significantly.

"Georgie?"

"Yes, I think it slipped out before he had thought about it."

“Yes, I must admit, that is very informal indeed. Even if he had called you *Georgina,* I would have thought it a little remiss in terms of manners. But to shorten your name on top of it all seems a little too familiar.”

“Yes.”

“But perhaps it is because he has been thinking of you in those terms, my dear. I think it is very clear that the Duke has been interested in you from the moment you met. And you know that I have said it more than once, for I have seen it. But might his slip of the tongue not simply be because he has been thinking of you so much of late? And perhaps that is how he thinks of you in his mind, already a woman who returns his feelings, one whom he is free to address by her first name.”

“But Fleur, nobody else in this world has ever called me *Georgie*.”

“You mean …?”

“Yes, as a child, Samuel White always called me Georgie. I called him Sammy, and he called me Georgie. Nobody else, not even my parents, ever called me Georgie. It was only him.”

“But where did Sammy come from? Did your family never tell you?”

“No, as I said, he was always there. I always remember him; it was as if we grew up together, although not *entirely* together if you see what I mean.”

“But what did the other servants say of Sammy’s own parents? Could he possibly have been the product of an indiscretion below stairs? Was there any woman there who paid particular attention to him that you might look at now and come to suspect as motherly attention?”

“Mrs Townley was very fond of him, but I am bound to say that she was too old to have been his mother. He used to spend a good deal of time in the stables with Havers, the stable master, but I cannot say that the man seemed particularly affectionate towards him, so not a suspect as the father either.”

“But surely there were maids young enough to be his mother?”

“There were maids aplenty of just the right age, but my grandmother would never have allowed it. Any unmarried young woman below stairs would have been ejected from the household the minute that my grandmother became aware of her condition. And I can say so without any doubts, for I knew my grandmother to be just such a person.”

“Then it seems that he came from nowhere,” Fleur said vaguely and distantly. “Although he must have had a mother of his own at some point.”

“There is something I remember, something which has come back to me these last two nights as I have lain awake trying to remember everything I can about Sammy and our old life.”

“What is that?”

“It is a memory from many years ago, and so I cannot claim it to be absolutely true. Really, it is so peculiar that it might well be nothing more than a dream I had as a child. Still, I shall recount it to you anyway.” Georgina paused for breath. “When I was very little, I remember standing at the door of Ashdown Manor almost hiding behind my mother’s skirts. There was a woman pacing backwards and forwards in the grounds, just a few feet away from the front of the house. She was young and very pale, and so frail that she has stood out in my memory all these years later. She was wearing an ivory gown and had such pale skin and hair that she seemed almost like a ghost, a spirit of some kind, wandering back and forth desperately.”

“Goodness me, who was she?” Fleur said, sitting almost on the edge of the window seat in anticipation.

“I do not know who she was, and I do not remember her speaking at all. She just paced backwards and forwards with a look of the greatest sadness on her face that it affects me even now. And then I have a recollection of my grandmother taking her by the arm and walking

her away, almost as if intent to eject the young woman from the grounds of Ashdown Manor herself."

"And did she? I mean, did your grandmother eject her?"

"I can only imagine that she did, for she walked her smartly away, and the young woman seemed just too pale and defeated to object to it all. Of course, I might be adding to things with the benefit of adult eyes, so you must forgive me."

"And what happened then?"

"My mother gently closed the door, and I remember looking up at her. I am certain that she said something along the lines of *never mind, my dear*. And that was it; that is all that I can remember."

"Do you think it significant in some way, this curious visitation?"

"I think it must be, for why else would my mind turn to that old image after so many years?"

"But you said yourself that the vision of this young woman might be nothing more than a dream of your childhood."

"That is quite so, and so you see how confusing this all is."

“Georgina, you are such a sensible woman that I cannot think that you have made this up. I truly believe that *you* believe the Duke of Calder is your old friend, Samuel White. But I do not know how to get to the bottom of it all without risking a great upset with the man.”

“I think I must speak to him, though, Fleur.”

“I hate to say it, but I think you must speak to him also,” Fleur said with a sigh. “Because I do not think that you will be able to rest until you have. But you must be so very careful how you word it all, my dear, for he is still a Duke of the realm, and he might very well *not* be the Sammy White of your childhood. You must take great care not to accuse him outright of being a servant in disguise.”

“I know, I have thought and thought about what I might say and have come up with nothing. But I know that I must approach him; you are right that I will not rest until I know.

“When are you going to see him?”

“I think I must go as soon as possible. I think I must go before I lose my nerve.”

“Then we must come up with some plan or other. Obviously, you do not want the rest of the family to hear of any of this or even suspect you of making your way to Calder Hall at all. So, I think that we must

plan a day in Rowley, and then you must travel post-chaise to Calder Hall. I will wait for you in the tea room in the town, and my father's driver will be none the wiser that the two of us have gone our separate ways for the afternoon."

"Oh, that is very clever indeed, Fleur," Georgina said in admiration, realizing that there was more to keeping a secret than simply asking her cousin to hold it close.

"Then we shall make arrangements for tomorrow, what do you say?"

"I think that is a very fine idea, Fleur, and I thank you for helping me."

As terrified as Georgina was by the prospect of confronting the Duke of Calder with what she knew, or thought she knew, still, Georgina knew it must be done and was grateful to Fleur that it would come to pass much sooner than she had expected.

Chapter 10

Emerson Lockhart had not moved from Calder Hall once since the afternoon tea at which he had given himself away. At least he *thought* he had given himself away, for he was certain that he had seen recognition in her eyes.

How could he have been so stupid? How could he have allowed something of that nature to happen? When Georgina had dropped her glove, and he had retrieved it, it was suddenly the most natural thing in the world to call out to her in the way that he had always done when they were children.

Perhaps it was because they had spent such a comfortable, convivial afternoon; an afternoon in which he had felt more at ease in his role of Duke than he had done in the entire proceeding months that had led him to drop his guard.

The presence of Georgina Jeffries was comforting, even though it had become clear to him that she did not know who he was. Every time he saw her, he felt like Sammy again. Not as rough nor as cheeky as the boy he had once been, but as comfortable in his own skin as that child was. It was as if the pretense was all gone and things were back to how they were; he knew who he was when he was in her company. He was Sammy White. He *knew* himself. It did not matter then that he

was a servant, for it had never mattered to Georgina Jeffries, his one and only friend.

Perhaps that was why he had let his old childhood name for her slip so casually from his lips. Perhaps he had *wanted* to be Sammy again, to divest himself of the identity he now had, the identity he was sure was not his own.

Perhaps he had wanted her to know him, to remember him, and that deep in his heart, he did not care what consequences came of it. Maybe all he wanted was a friend in this world again, one he did not have to lie to, one he did not feel so uncomfortable with on account of perpetually trying to remember a story that was not his whilst remaining vigilant that he did not slip up and reveal something of the truth.

But, Georgina Jeffries was not *Georgie* anymore. She was a grown woman, the daughter of a baron, one who might well decide that something should be done about the impostor who was calling himself the Duke of Calder. A great many changes could befall a person in that transition from child to adult and, whilst he thought her a very fine young lady indeed, Emerson knew that he could not say exactly that she would not be appalled by him.

It was a very easy thing for a child to look upon a servant with warmth and familiarity and quite another for that same child to do so

as an adult. By the time they had grown into adulthood, they had been subject to the teachings of their parents, the opinions of their peers, the judgements of their own class. It would take an extraordinarily strong child to resist becoming the adult that all around them would have them be.

And yet Georgie had been strong, the strongest person he had known. In all of Ashdown Manor, the young Georgina Jeffries was the only living and breathing soul who had ever, as far as he was aware, stood up to that spiteful, fearsome old woman.

The servants were all terrified of the old Baroness, for Elizabeth Jeffries was not known for her kindness and understanding. Quite the opposite, in fact, for she was known for her short temper and harsh judgements.

And the young Sammy, so small and insignificant that he was often forgotten when the adult servants turned to gossip, had heard much which suggested that Elizabeth had always been the driving force in that household. Although Sammy had never met the old Baron, he largely understood that his wife had bullied him this way and that, and that it was likely a great relief to the man when he had finally passed away.

And Sammy had seen with his own eyes, heard with his own ears, how she ruled her son, the new Baron Jeffries, with a rod of iron. She

spoke to him at times as if he were a child of Sammy's age instead of a fully-grown man, and he always wondered why it was that Lord Jeffries put up with it all. Why did he simply not tell her to be quiet?

But that sort of cowering and toeing the line would not do for Georgie. Georgie cowered to nobody, especially when justice was at stake.

Just as Emerson had been about to drift off once again into a comfortable past to relive some wonderful moment with his old friend, he heard the sound of carriage wheels on the gravel outside. He rose from his seat and crossed the immense drawing room to one of the large windows and peered out.

There was a post carriage outside, and yet it had already been that morning. He studied it with interest and confusion for a moment until he saw the driver jump down and open the door to help down none other than Georgina Jeffries herself.

By instinct, almost as if he had been scalded with boiling water, Emerson stepped back from the window. And then, almost as quickly as he had stepped away, he stepped back again, unable to take his eyes from her as she made her way to the front of the house.

So, she really had known him. The moment had come.

As Emerson waited for his guest to be shown in, he could not settle at all. His nerves were suddenly on high alert, his whole body feeling taut and ill at ease. It was certainly too early in the afternoon for him to be found nursing a glass of brandy in the drawing room. And yet it might have done much to steady him.

Hastening to the drinks cabinet, all the while listening intently for the sound of footsteps, Emerson took the stopper from the decanter, poured out a large helping of brandy, and quickly stoppered the bottle again.

He took a deep breath and drank the fiery brandy down in two large gulps before returning the glass and then racing back across the drawing room to take his seat by the fireplace.

“Your Grace, Miss Georgina Jeffries has arrived.” Mr Murray, the butler, was apologetic.

“Oh, I see,” Emerson said, surprised to find that he sounded entirely natural. “Well, why not? Show her in if you will.”

“Would you like tea to be sent, Your Grace?”

“I shall play it by ear. If the young lady is staying, then I will pull the bell rope.”

“Very good, Your Grace.” Murray bowed and retreated, returning in no time with Emerson’s guest.

“Miss Georgina Jeffries.”

“Thank you.” Emerson smiled at his butler. “Do come in, Miss Jeffries.”

“Forgive my intrusion, Your Grace,” she said quietly, her pretty cheeks turning a deep scarlet as she spoke.

“Not at all,” he said and could tell by her expression that she was finding everything so very confusing and difficult.

He wanted to relieve her suffering, to get straight to the part where all was known between them. Those last few moments had him feeling as if he were hanging in some dreadful limbo, his heels dangling over a roaring fire.

“Your Grace … I …” she said and stared at him helplessly, standing as still as a statue where she was just a few feet into the room from the closed door.

“You must ask your question, Miss Jeffries,” he said and shrugged.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but look me in the eyes and tell me that you

are *not* Samuel White."

"I cannot, for I am Samuel White. At least I was," he said, and despite not knowing what the consequences of his admission might be, Emerson realized that he felt freer at that moment than he had ever done since leaving Ashdown Manor as a boy of eleven years.

"You are Sammy?" she said as if she could not quite believe that he had admitted it without a struggle of any kind.

"I am Sammy," he said and looked into her bright blue eyes as they shone with tears. "It is me, Georgie."

Without a word, she dashed into his arms. She was openly weeping, and she clung to him fiercely. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and held her tightly to him, feeling the years peel away to leave them two little children, old friends, reunited at last.

"I am so very sorry, Georgie. I knew the very moment I met you at the garden party that it was you."

"But I did not know it was you," she said miserably.

"But you still have the same name, Georgie. You are still *Miss Georgina Jeffries* as you were back then. Not only am I no longer Sammy White, but I am Emerson Lockhart, the Duke of Calder. How could you

possibly have known it was me?"

"But how did you get here? Where did you go? I cannot tell you how I have worried all these years, not for a moment knowing what had become of you or even if you were still alive. My mother said that you had run away, that I should forget you. Is that what you did? Did you run away? But how does a young boy who runs away from his position in a house in Hertfordshire become the Duke in a county so many miles away?"

"I was taken from Ashdown Manor, Georgie. I had no choice in it, nor have I had any say in my life since then. It is true to say that I have *never* had any say in my life, either as a child or as a young man. It is only now that I am the Duke of Calder that I have any autonomy whatsoever. And now that I have it, I do not know what to do with it; I do not know my origins, and I cannot say for certain that I have any right on this earth to call myself the Duke."

"But who took you? And did you come straight here?" She had leaned back to look up into his eyes, but still, her hands lay on his arms, and it seemed that she would not release him.

And Emerson knew that he did not want to be released; he had found his friend again, and he wanted to embrace her for the rest of time.

"I hardly know where to begin, Georgie. I have been so afraid these

last weeks that you would finally realize exactly who I am and that everything would tumble down around me. But now that you know, now that you are here, I can only be glad. I have held the secret for so long, and I cannot begin to tell you how heavy a burden that has been for me, both man and boy."

"I am so very sorry for what you have been through, Sammy," she said as she began to search through her small velvet purse for a handkerchief.

"Here," he said with a smile is as he handed her his own. "Take this."

"Thank you, Sammy," she responded and hastily dried her tears. "But forgive me, I am forgetting myself. You are a Duke, and I ought to address you correctly."

"I could not bear for you to continue to call me *Your Grace*. And I have not been called Sammy for so long that it is a treat for me now."

"What happened that day?"

"I know that I just simply disappeared, and I was sure that your parents would never tell you exactly how it was that I came to be gone. I have always worried what you would have thought, how concerned you would have been, and yet I was powerless to do anything about it." He paused for a moment, taking her arm and

leading her to a seat by the fire. “Sit down, Georgie,” he said, and she did just that. “When he came for me, it was in the middle of the night.”

“Who came to you?”

“It was Garrett Winstanley.”

“Garrett Winstanley? Was that not your old attorney, the attorney of my father’s cousin also?”

“Yes, and he was a very fine man, despite what I am about to tell you.”

“Do go on.”

“I was in my little bed and fast asleep when your father came to get me. I remember the light from his candle in the darkness and how he gently placed a hand over my mouth when I began to speak. After all, the Baron had never come into my tiny little room before, and I was surprised to see him there, not to mention the fact that I was groggy from sleep. Without a word, I followed him silently through the corridors below stairs and then up the servants’ staircase. He led me through the house until we were in the entrance hall of Ashdown, a place I had never seen before in all the years that I had lived there. I remember thinking how wonderful it was, how spacious and warm

and how cheerful, even though it was lit only by a handful of candles on that night."

"You must have been so afraid."

"I think at the time I was more confused than afraid, Georgie. I knew that the Baron was a good man, and I was certain that he would not hand me to somebody who meant to hurt me. And your mother was there too. She smiled at me kindly and told me to be a good boy. I was to go away with the man who had come to collect me, and that was that."

"But did they not tell you who he was? Why he was there?"

"I wondered afterward if even they knew his name. The man I came to know as Garrett Winstanley hardly spoke to them in my presence, and I am bound to say that they seemed a little afraid of him. There was confusion in the air, and it was not all my own, at least that is what I think now when I look back down the years and try to separate that one memory from all the others."

And so, Garrett Winstanley took you away from Ashdown Manor without a word of explanation?"

"Yes, that is precisely what happened."

“And then, when I woke the next day, you were gone,” she said sadly.

“Yes.” He said and pulled the bell rope at the side of the fireplace. “I think I shall have some tea sent for.”

Chapter 11

“I can hardly believe that I have been able to make it through the rest of the afternoon and dinner, Georgina,” Fleur said when the two of them sat in their nightgowns on Georgina’s bed by the light of a single candle. “How hard it is to find a secret place to talk and the time in which to do so. I would never have imagined how difficult it is.”

When Georgina had returned to the tea room in Rowley to reunite with Fleur, she knew it would not be possible to tell her everything she knew in so public a place. Her appearance was certainly enough to tell Fleur that she had been greatly upset during the afternoon, but she dared not utter a word about it, and her cousin had immediately perceived the sense in such a decision.

They had also silently agreed not to discuss it on the journey home, for they could not risk the driver hearing any part, even though he was completely outside of the carriage in his driver’s seat.

No sooner had they returned home than it was time to dress for dinner, and so they had been thwarted once again. And dinner seemed to go on for an awfully long time at night, with both Felix and Jeremy in fine and talkative moods, not to mention full of inquiry as to why the two young women were not.

In the end, it had been necessary for both Georgina and Fleur to put on a little act, to forget that they had great things to discuss, and to act for all the world as if nothing had changed.

“I am so sorry, Fleur. How you must have suffered until I could get here,” Georgina said and smiled, remembering how she had scampered through the second floor of the house the moment she heard silence descend and judged the whole family to be in their beds for the night.

“You are here now, that is the main thing,” Fleur said, and it was clear that her anticipation was building higher still. “Tell me, is it him? Is the Duke of Calder *really* your childhood friend?”

“It is him,” Georgina said, and Fleur gasped, even though Georgina truly believed that *that* was the answer that her cousin had been expecting all evening.

“Good heavens, did he admit it straight away?”

“He knew why I was there; I could see it in his face. And when it seemed that I could not gather myself, he told me to ask my question.”

“I daresay he has been thinking of nothing else since he made his slip and called you Georgie.”

“He looked tired, that much was true. And his hair was perhaps a little more unruly than normal.”

“I hope he did not suffer, for he seems like a very nice man, despite the illusion.”

“He is a nice man, and the illusion was none of his doing. It all came about when he was so young, and he was never given an opportunity to go back again.”

“You must tell me everything.”

As Georgina gave her wide-eyed cousin a full account, she quickly realized that it would be some time before the two women managed to settle down for the night. She would have to suffer another night without a great deal of sleep; that was certain.

“So, the Duke, the old Duke that is, really *was* his father?” Fleur said in a whisper as Georgina’s tale of the afternoon continued.

“The old Duke told him as much that is true. But I think it is clear that Sammy does not know whether or not to believe it. Really, he is so very lost. I can hardly imagine what it is like to reach the age of one-and-twenty and not truly know who you are or where you came from. And he was forced to live a lie, to tell so many lies, that I think he hardly knew who to trust in the end.”

“But Garrett Winstanley is a man to whom he seemed to take, especially since he initially lived with him.” Fleur looked tired, and yet it was clear that she would not wait until the following day for the rest of the story.

“Yes, but Garrett Winstanley was loyal to his master, never once telling Sammy the full details. But it is true that he was kind to Sammy from the first, taking him into his home and doing what he could to allay his fears.”

Georgina remembered the warmth in Sammy’s voice when he had talked of Garrett Winstanley and that first year after Ashdown Manor when he had lived in the man’s home. They had lived a quiet life, and it was there that he had been schooled in the idea that he must become somebody else entirely. Almost immediately, he had come to answer to the name of Emerson Lockhart and was told that he was destined for great things. And it was there that he was schooled thoroughly and his manners worked upon until he was fit to be sent to Eton to continue the rest of his educational training.

But Georgina had also seen the strain in his eyes when he had recounted how it had been necessary for him to learn repeatedly the story of his origins. A story that he knew was not true and could not possibly be so. He was to be the son of the Duke and Duchess of Calder, a couple who had been left in quiet sadness when their only

son, a boy in failing health, had been taken as a baby in hopes that something could be done for him. As his health began to improve, the couple held out greater hope for his survival, and so it was, only a little late, that he was sent to Eton in hopes of catching up with his peers and fulfilling the education that would be so necessary to him when he finally inherited the Calder estate and title.

“But he never met the Duchess, you say? And he does not think that she was his real mother?” Fleur said, full of confusion.

“No, he never met her. He only ever met the Duke, and only ever away from Calder Hall until the Duchess, a woman who it seems had been in perpetual ill-health, finally passed away. It was then that he was able to spend school holidays at Calder Hall instead of being forced to stay alone at Eton when all his cohorts had returned to their families. And he is certain that the Duchess of Calder was not his mother, and even more certain that she did not know of his existence.”

“Good heavens.”

“When he finally asked the Duke if the Duchess had ever known him or if she truly was his mother, the man admitted that she was not. He gave Sammy to understand that he really was his father, having an illicit love affair some years previously with an unknown woman. Sammy was the product of that affair, and so the Duchess could not be

told. Her health was failing so badly that the Duke had not wanted to bring such heartbreak into her life, or what was left of it."

"But Sammy does not believe the Duke was his father?"

"I think he has so many doubts that it is hard for him to fix upon the truth. I must admit that I do suspect that the Duke *was* his father, for there is no other reason for the man to have gone to such lengths in building such deceit and risking his own reputation if he were ever found out."

"Yes, I would tend to agree with you, my dear. But I can also understand fully why Sammy might not so easily believe anything in his world. It is so sad, Georgina. How lonely he must have been all these years."

"Lonelier than lonely, I believe. He explained a little to me of his schooling, not much, but enough for me to realize that he could not form any true friendships there. After all, he could not risk dropping his guard for a moment and accidentally telling a friend something that might reveal a little more of his real origins."

"And so, he kept himself apart?"

"Simply so that he could keep the burden of his father's secrets weighing heavy upon him and not break beneath them. Whilst he has

grown in stature in this world, I cannot help thinking that the Duke did him a great disservice on the day he stole him away from Ashdown Manor."

"But he would have continued in this world as a servant when his blood would suggest otherwise."

"And whilst he would not have known of his origins, he would have known who he was as a human being, Fleur. He would not have found it necessary to remain ever vigilant and to perpetually rehearse the lie that he had been forced to rehearse from the age of eleven. He would have been himself; he would have always been Samuel White."

"So, how old was he when he finally attended Calder Hall for the first time?" Fleur went on.

"It was more than a year later when the Duchess finally passed away. Sammy was twelve, almost thirteen when he first went to Calder Hall. And I can only imagine his awe and wonder, for he had been a simple servant, and the grandest he had ever known life to be was when he moved into the home of his father's attorney. But when he saw his family home for the first time, he must surely have almost been afraid of such enormity and grandeur. Really, when you think of the impact it has on adults, the impact that it had on both of us at the garden party, then imagine how a young boy who had thought himself a servant would feel to be told that *that* was now his home."

“I cannot begin to imagine.”

“I think he still feels it even now, for I am certain that he is not settled in his role of Duke, and he more than once alluded to the idea that he was an impostor there, that he does not assume that he truly does have a right to call himself the Duke of Calder.”

“Perhaps, in time, he will come to realize that whilst he might not have been the legitimate result of his father’s marriage, he is still his father’s son.”

“I do not think it is as simple as that. I think that Sammy needs to know once and for all who he is.”

“But who is there left to tell him? You said yourself, Garrett Winstanley had died before Sammy determined to question him thoroughly. And with his father gone and so suddenly, who is there for him to ask? And even if they were still here, it seems unlikely that either man would have told him the full truth, for there had surely been ample opportunity to do so in the intervening years.”

“You will think me ridiculous, Fleur, but I have told the Duke that I will help him. I have told Sammy that I will do everything in my power to find out who he is and how he came to be at Ashdown Manor all those years ago.”

“I do not think you ridiculous at all,” Fleur said firmly. “I think you most kindhearted and a very fine friend to offer such a thing. And you must allow me to help you where I can, even if it is only to use me as a sounding board for your ideas.”

“I am very grateful to you.”

“Does the Duke know that I know?” Fleur said cautiously.

“He asked me if I had told anybody, and I could not lie to him. He has been lied to enough.”

“And how did he bear that news?”

“Not very well at first, but he quickly realized that I could not have made my way out to him without your help today. And then it was an easy thing to assure him of your confidence in all regards, so you must not worry about any of it.”

“Did you ask him about the lady?” Fleur said suddenly. “The lady you saw, the ghostly lady who was so pale and delicate.”

“I did not think to ask him, Fleur. I must admit that my own emotions were so very fluid that I had quite forgotten about her. And, in truth, I think it might be too early for such things. We were both greatly

shaken by our conversation, even if it did bring us a good measure of relief after so many years. I think that we covered as much as we could today; there was not enough left of either one of us to go on in the end."

"Quite so," Fleur agreed. "So, how you to begin? How are you to help him?"

"In truth, I do not know where to start. I was so determined to say something that would ease him just a little that I had offered my assistance before I had really thought about whether or not there was anything that I could do."

"Your grandmother seems to be a very good starting point."

"Do you think so? Goodness, if only she were still alive."

"Why? After all, it seems unlikely that she would part with any secrets if she were," Fleur said and shrugged.

"Yes, and in truth, she might make more trouble than she would solve," Georgina said firmly. "Yes, you are quite right. My grandmother is the starting point, but not one who would ever help us, alive or dead."

"And what of your parents, perhaps they might know something?"

“My father was very cowed by his mother, it has to be said. My mother was too, although I am certain that she never liked her mother-in-law for a moment. Perhaps I could make some secret inquiries with my mother, carefully worded, of course, to see if she can shed any light on the matter.

“And perhaps we ought to find out what your grandmother was like, really like, from the person who knew her the longest,” Fleur said with a bright smile.

“Of course, Great Aunt Belle,” Georgina said, feeling that all was not lost and that, if nothing else, she at least had a sense of direction.

She would start with great Aunt Belle; she would find out anything of note that that dear old lady could tell her.

“Right, that is where we must begin, with Great Aunt Belle,” Georgina said, happy that she finally had a plan. “We must start tomorrow.”

Chapter 12

Great Aunt Belle's senses were by no means as blunted as Georgina had hoped. That alert and hawk-eyed lady clearly suspected her two great-nieces of searching for information with a purpose.

She did not believe for a moment that they were simply trying to make comparisons between Mirabelle and Elizabeth as sisters all those years ago. It was not idle curiosity, but curiosity with a very determined point and Great Aunt Belle made no mystery of the fact that she was suspicious.

However, it had not stopped her from speaking a little about her sister and their upbringing at Winton House all those years ago.

Armed with some minor information, the two young cousins set off a day later to repeat their performance of going into the town of Rowley for the afternoon. Once again, Georgina made the rest of the journey traveling post-chaise, this time happy in the knowledge that she would be driven back into town by one of the Duke of Calder's drivers, just as she had been on her last visit.

As the post carriage made its way along the great gravel driveway to Calder Hall, Georgina spied the Duke himself out on the grounds from her window and called up to the driver that he should stop just there

and let her out.

The driver did just that, and the sound of the carriage turning, spraying gravel here, there, and everywhere, finally caught the Duke of Calder's attention. He looked over at her from a distance and waved enthusiastically.

Georgina hurried through the pathway lined with immaculate box hedging and then took one of the gravel paths to the sundial where he waited for her.

"I have come a long way since Ashdown Manor, have I not?" he said and looked at the immense sundial.

"You most certainly have," Georgina said with a smile, pleased that he seemed to be glad of her sudden and unannounced presence once again.

"The only problem is, I do not know quite how or why or even *if* I have a right to it."

"From everything you have told me, Sammy, I am sure that you have a right to it. I am certain that the previous Duke was your father, for I can see no other reason for him to go to such lengths. But I can also understand why you might not be quite so ready to trust him, especially since there was so much of importance that he did not tell

you."

"And not only was he a very ready liar, Georgie, but he made one out of me also."

"No, I do not think you are a ready liar, Sammy, but the most reluctant one. The little boy who did not have any option or say in the matter."

"Then you are still determined to help me, Georgie?" He smiled at her, and a light breeze lifted his thick and unruly silvery ash brown hair.

She wondered if his hair was quite that colour when he was a boy. It had been brown, she knew, and very likely a little dirty at times, probably too dirty for her to see its finer lights.

"Of course I am, and I have already begun. At least I have tried, at any rate. In truth, I do not know what help it is yet, but it is a start."

"And would you like to go inside, or would you care to stay out here in the grounds and enjoy the sunshine? I am very mindful of the fact that your health must be protected, Georgie."

"I think I would prefer to keep outside. My father's cousin is still so anxious for my health that I am indoors more than I am out, and so it would be a great treat for me to take a walk around the grounds."

“Well, then we shall do just that,” he said and held out his arm for her to take.

“I think that you and I both realize that it would be necessary for us to discover how it was you came to be at Ashdown Manor in the first place. It is the only starting point I can think of which would satisfy everything.”

“By everything, do you mean to find my mother?” he said quietly and looked suddenly so sad that Georgina could have cried.

“It would be wonderful, would it not, to find her?”

“It would be wonderful, but my father told me that she had died.”

“Oh dear, I am so very sorry,” Georgina said truthfully.

“I suppose it is a fact of life which exists,” he said and shrugged. “But I am bound to say that I would have given almost anything to have at least met her just the once. Even just to have seen her.”

Quite without warning, thoughts of the frail and pale lady of so many years before flooded Georgina’s mind.

“Many years ago, I think I could not have been more than six, I

remember seeing a lady, a young lady, out in the front grounds of Ashdown Manor," Georgina began tentatively.

"Right," he said and narrowed his gaze in confusion. "Who was she?"

"I do not know, nor did I ever see her again. And if I am honest, I am not entirely sure that she is not simply a phantom of a childhood dream."

"Well, tell me anyway," he said and smiled before they turned to resume walking arm in arm once again.

Their conversation fell to silence as they walked through the open archway in the west wing of the building, just as she had done on her first visit to Calder Hall with her family. They did not resume speaking again until they had reached the rear gardens and were buried deeply in amongst so many roses and camellias, all of which were now beginning to show off their late spring blooms.

"She was very pale and thin and quite young, I think. She looked forlorn, and I remember hiding behind my mother's skirts and peeking out to watch her pace back and forth across the lawn. She did not say anything, at least nothing that I heard, and then my grandmother appeared and took her harshly by the arm and walked her away. And I never saw her again."

“Did you ask who she was?”

“No, but I was so little. But you would have been eight years old then, I am sure. Can you think if you saw her on that day?”

“You forget I was a servant, Georgie. I was so rarely at the front of the house, and certainly nowhere in sight of the great entrance door where I might be seen by guests.”

“I am so sorry,” Georgina said and felt suddenly embarrassed to have reminded him of his position. “You were always more than that to me.”

“I know I was, and I do not need an apology from you. I do not need an apology from any of them, for they did not treat me badly. They simply treated me as a servant, which is what I was at the time.”

“Then you did not see the lady at all?”

“No, I did not,” he said and suddenly reached out to pluck an early pale pink rose from the bush. “Here, this is for you,” he said with a smile as he handed her the bloom.

“Oh Sammy, thank you,” she answered and smiled, thinking how like the old Sammy White it was to be so spontaneous, to suddenly have his attention drawn away by something else altogether and to act

upon it.

It was that very quality which had drawn her to him when they were children, the idea that anything might happen next because Samuel White could not concentrate fully for more than two minutes together.

“But I can tell that you think her appearance significant,” he said, quite suddenly returning to the conversation at hand.

“I beg your pardon?” she said, drawing the rose to her face and taking in its delicate scent.

“The pale young woman on the lawn of Ashdown Manor. I can tell you think her presence that day was significant.”

“If she truly *was* there, Sammy, yes.”

“I cannot think that so young a child would clearly remember a dream, or even a nightmare, so many years later. Let us work on the idea that you really did see her, that this distraught woman really did attend Ashdown Manor that day.”

“Yes, let us keep that in mind,” she said gently. “Even though I cannot yet say if it helps us or not.”

“And did you have other news? Other things you had discovered?” he

said and looked politely hopeful.

“Yes, yes, but again I do not know how it helps. But at least it is something.”

“I am grateful for anything you discover, Georgie. And I want you to know that if there is no answer to be found, I shall be grateful to you nonetheless. I will never regret for one moment allowing my tongue to slip that day and give me away, for I am so very pleased to have you back in my life.”

“As am I, Sammy. I really have missed you all these years.”

“So, tell me the rest,” he said with a smile. “I can tell you still have more to say.”

“I made a few gentle inquiries with Great Aunt Belle,” she began.

“Great Aunt Belle?” he said with a broad smile. “I am certain that I have never met her and yet, at the same time, I already have a mental image.” He laughed.

“And it will undoubtedly be the right one,” Georgina said and laughed also. “She is a fearsome and yet kindly lady of advancing years with a shrewd mind, a sharp wit, and an even sharper memory. And she is also the older sister of my grandmother.”

“Do you know, I can still remember your grandmother’s face, every line of it, as clearly as if I had looked upon it every day of the last ten years,” he said, and she could tell that it was not a fond memory.

“I had very little care for my grandmother, it is true. I warmed to her a little as she aged, but I never forgave her for her treatment of you, and of me.”

“Yes, I remember well that you were often a victim of her cruelty, and almost always in connection with your defense of me. And here you are all these years later, once again doing your very best to help me.”

“Because we are friends, Sammy. Or should I call you Emerson now? I really am a little confused about it all.”

“I would prefer you to call me Sammy, just as you always did. It reminds me who I really am, even if I still do not know who that was.” He laughed. “But it is as close to the truth as I can get, for to talk about those times does not involve a lie of any kind to pass my lips when I am with you.”

“Then I shall call you Sammy and think of you as Sammy. But I shall be very careful to address you properly as the Duke whenever there are others in our presence. I will never do anything to give you away, Sammy. I will never do or say anything that would hurt you or put

your position here at risk."

"I know," he said, and they set off again, with Sammy leading her towards a beautiful old wall covered in the most sumptuous green rhododendrons.

The rhododendrons looked as thick and as comfortable as a mattress, so springy and lush. The closer they got, the more she could see that the great sprawling foliage was covered in buds ready to open as the summer progressed. She could see through the pale membrane that the buds, when they finally flowered, would be the deepest shade of blood red. She truly hoped that she would still be in Devonshire when the time came for them to open so that she could stare upon them in wonder, a wall of red and green.

"I think if there was anybody on this earth who could have told us exactly of your origins, Sammy, it is true to say that it was Baroness Elizabeth Jeffries. And so, I thought it might be informative to find out as much as I can about my grandmother, for I am not so sure that I knew her particularly well myself, given that I spent much of my childhood hiding from her."

"Understandably."

"Anyway, Great Aunt Belle, or Mirabelle, and Elizabeth were not the best of friends as sisters. Elizabeth, I believe, was a very hard young

woman whose ambition knew no bounds. As my great aunt tells it, Elizabeth was going to marry a man of title come what may, whether she liked him or not, and that was her only goal."

"A type that still thrives today, I believe."

"Indeed." Georgina laughed and wondered just how many young women of the type had thrown themselves at the new Duke of Calder in the last months. "Anyway, Elizabeth had only one friend in the world, and that was Beatrice Ellington. They were, as my aunt describes them, as thick as thieves, neither girl to be trusted, at any rate. Of course, that might simply be Aunt Belle's sentiment rather than a particular fact." She laughed. "For it is very clear, even all these years later, that there was no love lost between my grandmother and my great aunt."

"And did they keep friends? Your grandmother and Beatrice Ellington?"

"Very good question, Sammy." Georgina smiled in approval. "And one that I asked myself. And yes, they maintained a friendship for the rest of their lives, predominantly in written correspondence, since my grandmother moved to Hertfordshire and her friend to Cornwall."

"If they were so close, then there is a healthy chance that Beatrice Ellington would know the details of my birth. At any rate, she might

know your grandmother's involvement in all of it and how I came to live as a servant at Ashdown Manor."

"Yes, if she is still alive. She would, of course, be only a little younger than Great Aunt Belle herself. But still, it is an inquiry worth making. After all, Aunt Belle looks set to go on forever, and there is no reason why this Beatrice Ellington might not still be alive somewhere."

"And how do you propose to discover it?"

"When the dust has settled a little, and my great aunt has given up suspecting me of something she cannot quite put her finger on, I will sneak up into the attics with my cousin and see if we can find any of this correspondence. I realize that it will be extraordinarily dated, but it might give us some further indication of the closeness of the women and if there was anybody else in their circle who might be of use to us."

"Good heavens, it is hard to imagine it, but you are cleverer than ever."

"I have been very lonely at Ashdown Manor since you left, Sammy, and so I took great refuge in improving my mind since there seemed to be little else to do."

"Did you have no friends at all?"

“I did, but not close ones. Perhaps, like you, I never really settled into proper friendships after ours was so cruelly taken from us.”

“But it is back now, is it not? We are reunited.”

“Yes, we are reunited, and I will do everything in my power to help you.” She smiled and turned to look back in the direction from which they had come. “Now, I wonder if I might trouble you for some transport back into Rowley, for I have once again left Fleur alone in the tea room.”

“Yes, of course,” he said with a smile. “But do try to come back soon, Georgie. I have missed you these last two days.”

“I will.”

Chapter 13

The letter from her mother arrived so quickly that Georgina realized she must have begun to write her response the moment she had finished reading Georgina's own letter.

Georgina had enlisted Fleur's help in the construction of the letter to her mother, keen for her cousin's opinion on how best to approach the thing. After all, she did not know how much her mother knew, and she certainly did not know if her mother had any idea that the current Duke of Calder was, in fact, their old servant, Samuel White.

She was very keen not to give Sammy away, not even to her own mother. After all, her mother might well be part of that secret, an active part, even now.

In the end, she had written her mother a very simple and vague sort of a letter.

"Dearest Mama,

I must first thank you so much for sending me here to Devonshire, for I do believe that it is working wonders for my health. I have been very careful, as promised, not to overexert myself or spend too much time out of doors, in case you were wondering and worrying, my dear.

Felix is as wonderful and as kind as Papa, and he is very careful that I do not do too much. And Fleur continues to be an absolute delight to me, almost like a sister it is true to say. And Jeremy remains amusing, keeping us all entertained with his clever words and silly actions.

I must admit that I find Great Aunt Belle the most refreshing of all my new discoveries. I cannot tell you how very different she is from my own grandmother, and it is impossible to think that the two women could ever have grown up in this wonderful house in Rowley as sisters. She is very much kinder and a good deal more fun, it has to be said.

I think you would like her, Mama, at any rate. She is nothing like my father's mother at all, a point which I am sure you would find agreeable.

Much apart from hoping that you are well and my keenness to assure you of my own improving health, I have another reason for writing to you, and I hope you will forgive it.

Whilst I have been here in Devon, I am absolutely certain that I have seen a young man whom I recognize completely from my childhood. You will think it a little strange, but I feel sure that I have seen none other than Samuel White, albeit only from afar.

I would not, of course, mention anything to him, for he is a young man of some note, and I would not like to remind him that he was once a servant

in my own home. But still, I have found it a little unsettling, and it has caused me to think almost perpetually of those days, and I have once again fallen to wondering exactly how it was he came to leave our home ten years ago.

I hope you will not respond as you did back then and simply tell me that he ran away, for I know in my heart that that is not the truth. I am sure that there was more to be known about Samuel White than his lowly beginnings would ever have suggested, and I should like to know the truth of it. Or, at least, as much of the truth as you have at your disposal, Mama.

I have not written anything to my father, nor shall I, in hopes that you and I might keep this between us. If there is some reason that you cannot help me, I shall understand. But I must tell you that I have never stopped wondering about my old friend all these years, and I feel that, as a fully-grown woman, I should be very grateful if you would be entirely honest with me.

Not only about the departure of Sammy White from our home, but exactly how it was he came to be there in the first place.

I have racked my memory, shaking it until all the pieces that are available have fallen out before me, and I cannot remember a time before Samuel. I have it in my mind that he was always there, or at least there from a time when I had an ability for cognizance.

Please forgive me for my impertinence not only in asking but in suggesting that you have more truth at your disposal than you have previously given me. And please understand that I have had many years of wondering and worrying and should like this mystery to be brought to an end finally.

And please do write back to tell me about you and Papa and what you have been doing. I trust that you are both well and are not missing me too much whilst I am here in Devonshire.

Take the very greatest of care, Mama, and please do write back to me as soon as you have the chance of it.

With much love,

Your loving daughter,

Georgina."

It had been Fleur's idea not to give too much away in the initial letter, stating that the white lie of not having approached Sammy White was a necessary one. After all, it was still not clear how much Georgina's mother knew, or how much she might be bound to reveal of her daughter's own findings to a third party.

As soon as Felix's butler had handed Georgina her mother's letter at the breakfast table, Fleur's eyes had been wide with excitement.

The moment that Georgina excused herself from the breakfast table to make her way upstairs, she knew that Fleur would not be far behind.

Instead of opening the letter immediately, she waited on the window seat in Fleur's room, knowing that her cousin would be there at any moment. She had been so helpful that Georgina would not start without her but would read the letter aloud so that they could both hear it for the first time together.

"Goodness me, I had gone to your chamber, my dear," Fleur said, clearly out as breath as she bustled into her own room. "What does it say? Does she say anything about Sammy?"

"I have not opened it yet, Fleur," Georgina said with a laugh and held the unopened letter aloft. "I would not have started without you."

"Oh good, but you must open it now," she said, still breathing hard as she took her seat in the window next to her cousin.

"Right, let me begin," Georgina responded, full of excitement as she broke the seal.

"My dearest Georgina,

I am glad to hear that your health progresses and am bound to say that I

cannot wait until you return home here to Ashdown Manor. I have missed you greatly, my child, and the house does seem terribly quiet without you.

I am glad that things go well with your cousins and that you are so very comfortable at Winton House. Please do convey fondest regards from myself and your father as soon as you have the opportunity, my dear.

I will tell you honestly that your father and I are both very well, enjoying the warmth of early summer and the fortune of great health.

Now that the formalities are done, I shall get to the information that I know you are keenest to hear. I will tell you what I know of Sammy White but beg that you never discuss it with your father, for he has not authorized me to reveal what I am about to tell you.

I must first beseech you not to approach this man in any way, whether he truly is Samuel White or not. I cannot say that he is dangerous in any way, only that I do not exactly know which people surround him, or even what sort of person he might have truly hailed from in the first place.

I think you must already be reasonably aware that your grandmother had the fullest of information, information that she never parted with as far as I am aware. I am bound to say that I do not know where Samuel White came from all those years ago, except to tell you that he arrived at Ashdown Manor as a tiny baby. Up until the moment he was taken from our house, it is true to say that the child had never known another home.

But I am also bound to say that his appearance was most suspicious to me and very likely to your father, although he never spoke of it. He was, and likely even now still is, under the spell of your grandmother. He grew up in such circumstances that taught him never to ask her anything or to question her motives but once.

I believe that he holds fast to that to this day, although it is quite subconscious, I am sure. Still, that is business for your father and me to conclude one day and nothing for you to concern yourself with.

Suffice it to say that your father did not question the sudden appearance of this tiny baby. And your grandfather had already passed away by then, leaving your grandmother the head of Ashdown Manor in all but name. Whilst your father was the new baron, it was clear that the old Baroness would not relinquish the reins of her control until the day she died.

And I am not ashamed to tell you that when that day finally came, I could feel nothing in my heart but the deepest rejoicing, for my life was made miserable by that dreadful woman, and I think it is only that which causes me now to open my heart to tell you everything that I knew.

When Samuel White first came into our home, he was carried in your grandmother's arms. There was no other person with her, and she simply asserted that she had been approached by one of the guardians at the orphanage in Hatfield, Hertfordshire. It was a man she claimed to be

familiar with, a fundraiser who had persuaded her to part with much money over the years for the upkeep of the orphans.

I am bound to say that that was the first I had heard of it, for I had always assumed that your grandmother did not have a charitable bone anywhere in her body. Even now, I am not convinced that what she told us was true, quite the opposite, in fact.

Anyway, it was your grandmother's assertion that there was no room for this tiny baby at the orphanage in Hatfield and that she had been asked to take him in and have him raised below stairs as a servant to give him a chance in life.

I cannot believe for a moment that your grandmother would have done anything but scoff at such a request from anybody, and the harsh manner in which she carried the child led me to believe that she did not have a moment's feeling for him at all.

She handed him down to the servants immediately and charged them with the raising of him. After that, she never seemed once to enquire after his well-being, and he only came to her notice again years later when you and he became little friends.

I was surprised to find that she was quite so vehement in keeping you away from him, especially when she had been the person to bring him to us in the first place. And yet I was not, perhaps, quite so surprised to find that she

had no care for him, for I do not ever remember witnessing her care for anybody, even her own son.

She truly was the hardest of women, and I only ever remember her talking of somebody fondly when she spoke of her formative years in Devonshire. Even then, it was not to speak of her family but to speak of her friend Beatrice Ellington, or Beatrice Montgomery as she became.

After so many years had passed, Samuel White was merely another servant to me, if I am honest. I had long since stopped wondering at his origins and accepted that he was there at Ashdown House to work as a servant for the foreseeable future, perhaps even for the rest of his life and ours.

And then, just a few short months after your grandmother had passed away, your father and I were awoken in the night by a man who had found a way into Ashdown Manor without making himself known.

To this day, I do not know how the man made his way in; the first I was aware of him was when he stood at the foot of the bed in which your father and I slept.

Even now, ten years later, I cannot think of the thing without breaking out into a dreadful cold sweat, and I suffer the most awful palpitations in my heart. I had truly thought that he had meant to do us harm, and when he spoke to tell us that we were in no danger, I did not believe him for a minute.

He told your father to make his way silently below stairs and retrieve the boy known as Samuel White. He was to do so without waking any of the servants, and he was to see to it that the boy did not make any fuss himself.

The implication was that if your father did not comply entirely, I would befall some misfortune in our own chamber.

However, the man, whose name I do not know and do not care to, merely told me to make my way downstairs with him to meet my husband and Samuel White in the entrance hall when they returned from below stairs. I did as he requested, of course, and we had just arrived at the bottom of the stairs when your father arrived with Samuel.

I can remember it all as if it were yesterday; it was so strange and so shocking to have been woken in such a way.

After the man had put Samuel into his carriage and demanded that he remain quiet, he returned to us and told us that we must never look for the boy again.

Your father said that he would have no reason to, given that Samuel White was just a servant and nothing more. But I had a terrible tugging at my heart and wondered what was about to become of the child. Servant or not, he was so young, and I had a sudden urge to protect him.

I think that the man could see it, for when he spoke again, he addressed me rather than your father. He told me that we should simply assume that the boy had run away, saying nothing to the servants or any other family member about what had transpired that night.

He said that if we spoke out of turn or made any moves to track the boy, we would be all the sorrier for it, for his employer was extraordinarily powerful and certainly much more powerful than a Hertfordshire baron could imagine.

I am ashamed to say that that was enough for me. I was afraid of this man and his employer, whoever that might be. And I believed that we would come to some harm if we did not accede to his wishes.

That is why I must insist that you do not approach this man, even if you do believe him to be Samuel. I would beg that you forget him and take all that I have told you to be as much truth as I have. Now that must satisfy you a little, must it not? I live in the hope that it will be enough to keep you from delving any further into the matter, or else I will have to insist that you come home immediately.

I will expect a response from you as soon as you can give it, for I shall not rest until I have your word that you will make no further inquiry in this regard.

And you must absolutely assure me that you are taking good care of your health, or I shall ride to Devonshire in the carriage myself and collect you.

In all other respects, my dear, take the very greatest care and, as I have already said, pass on my fondest regards to your father's cousin.

With all my love my dear child,

Mama."

"Good heavens!" Fleur said, her mouth hanging agape.

"So, you were right, my dear. My grandmother was at the root of this, although I had never suspected that she was so greatly involved. Just imagine her carrying baby Sammy into the house with such a ridiculous explanation for his presence."

"I am bound to say that it is little wonder that your mother despised her so. But it is also little wonder that your mother and father did not question it, for your grandmother does sound like the harshest of our sex.

"Well, it is a starting place, and a very great one. But what are we to do with this information?" Georgina looked helplessly at Fleur.

"We will spend the day here at Winton House in tea and conversation

and little walks, and we will talk it through. The more we discuss it, the more it will become clear to us what move to make next, will it not? You must have faith, my dear. You are very clever indeed, and I have no doubt at all that you will be able to make sense of it sooner or later."

"Thank you, Fleur," Georgina said and patted her cousin's hand. "But I am sure that I could not do it without you by my side."

"Then I shall not leave your side, cousin."

Chapter 14

Georgina was in the morning room re-reading her mother's letter the following morning when Mirabelle came in quite unexpectedly.

Georgina smiled and nonchalantly folded the letter as she looked up at her great aunt.

"How are you this morning, my dear?" Aunt Belle began and narrowed her eyes as she studied Georgina's face.

"I am very well, thank you. I am just re-reading my mother's letter and intermittently staring out of the French windows at the beautiful lawn. It is a most peaceful room, is it not?" Georgina said in the hopes of keeping her great-aunt diverted.

"Yes, it is very peaceful. A very good room for thinking and planning."

"Planning?" Georgina said and raised her eyebrows innocently.

"My dear girl, I am old, but I am not entirely devoid of my senses." Mirabelle made her way further into the room and lowered herself slowly down onto the couch opposite Georgina.

She had a wonderful, doughy sort of face which was heavily lined in

honour of each and every one of her years. Her eyes were small and shrewd, and the only thing about Great Aunt Belle which reminded Georgina of her own grandmother. Mercifully, there the similarity ended.

“Forgive me, Aunt Belle, I had not meant to offend you in any way.”

“I know you have not, that is why I have chosen to help you, even though I know you will not tell me what all this desperate searching is about.”

“Desperate searching?” Georgina could hardly believe that she and Fleur had been found out already.

Surely, they had not given themselves away to such a degree.

“You are trying to uncover some great mystery, I have no doubt. And if it has something to do with my sister, then I wish you luck with it, for she was the most secretive and underhand person I have ever met in my life.”

“Yes, I am starting to believe that that is true,” Georgina said, sighing and realizing that she would have to be as honest as she could without giving away Sammy or his secret. “Aunt Belle, I wish I could tell you.”

“But you have told Fleur, and your mother has something to do with

it," Mirabelle said and smiled. "Do not worry," she said and held up a placating hand. "I am not about to cry that I am not allowed in on the secret too, for I can see that it pains you not to tell me."

"In truth, it does pain me, Aunt Belle. I like you very much, and I would not seek to mislead you in any way. But I have promised to keep the secret of an old friend and to help that old friend at the same time. But I am afraid that I cannot provide that help without asking questions, for there is no other way to get the bottom of things. Forgive me."

"You do not need forgiveness, my dear, for I can see that you have been entirely honest. I believe what you say, and I believe that you are most earnest in your determination to help your friend. But whatever it is, please promise me that it will not be to your own detriment to help. I would not like to see you put yourself in any trouble for somebody else, however much of a friend they might be to you and you to them; do you understand?"

"I promise, Aunt Belle."

"I had realized the moment that Fleur scampered up the stairs after you when you had received a letter from your mother that there really was something to my little suspicions. And I knew immediately, of course, that it must be to do with my sister, especially after the two of you had so inexpertly questioned me just days before."

“I really am so terribly sorry for the subterfuge, Aunt Belle.”

“I know my dear, and I know that whatever you are doing, it is with the best of intentions. You had not been here long at Winton House before I discerned that you were by no means your grandmother’s grandchild. I can only think that you must take after your mother to some degree, although there is a little something of the old Allencourt spirit about you. Still, you are your own person, and I find I like you very much. For one thing, it is clear that you know how to stand up for yourself, even against an old lady like me. But then I have no doubt that you had greater hurdles to overcome with your own grandmother back in Hertfordshire, did you not?”

“She was a most formidable woman, Aunt Belle, and far from caring. I cannot say that there was ever any true sympathy between us, even though I only knew her as a child myself. The atmosphere at Ashdown Manor was always greatly strained when she was alive, and that old sentiment seems to reappear whenever her name is mentioned, even all these years later.”

“Well, just be careful that Fleur does not give you away. She would not do so intentionally, but she finds it very hard to hide what is in her heart. I can certainly always see it on her face, as I saw the raw excitement yesterday morning when she clumsily excused herself from the breakfast table to follow you upstairs. She is a wonderful child, a

most caring little creature, but she wears her heart on her sleeve, and I think it would be a good thing if you counseled her in the art of doing otherwise. Not only will it help you now in your quest, but I am sure that it would help my dear Fleur in the art of life."

"I shall do my very best," Georgina said and smiled.

"I thought you would say as much." Mirabelle nodded thoughtfully. "Which is why I have chosen to help you, even if I am to remain in the dark like a cactus in the winter." She laughed.

"Help?" Georgina said hopefully, her pretty smile broadening.

"Yes, help." Mirabelle shrugged expansively. "When you return to your chamber in what I hope is a most sedate fashion, it will be to find an old keepsake box that once belonged to my sister. It is full of correspondence from her youth. I do not know how much assistance it will be to you, but it might give you some insight into whatever conundrum it is you are trying to solve."

"But what do the letters say?"

"I have no idea child. In truth, remembering life at home when Elizabeth was still here with us is not a happy recollection. The two of us were never friends, and I think it is true to say that I liked her constant companion, Beatrice Ellington even less. They were

schemers, and the most untrustworthy pair you could ever wish to meet. Oh, and they were ruthless."

"Ruthless, Aunt Belle?" Georgina said, her heart beginning to beat a little faster.

"Perhaps I ought to just leave you to read the letters and see if you can spot ruthlessness for yourself. If you do not find it, then you may come back to me and ask. It is hard to put into words, but theirs was something of an unholy alliance, a friendship that I always thought a most dangerous one. It was a relief to me when my sister threw a net over poor dear Baron Jeffries, your grandfather, and left for Hertfordshire. I am ashamed to say that, as much as I pitied the man for what was to come, I was equally relieved and pleased for myself and my brother that she was no longer here."

"Your brother? Felix's father?"

"Yes, Godfrey was a most wonderful brother. He was kind and sweet, and no match for Elizabeth. He secretly told me that there would always be a home for me here at Winton House, but that I must not share that information with Elizabeth lest she take advantage of that herself. He was as relieved as I when she became Baroness Jeffries and left us forever. And we very rarely saw her after that, for we had become beneath her, and she despised us." Mirabelle began to laugh. "And I have never been so pleased to be despised in all my life."

“I should have liked to have met Great Uncle Godfrey.”

“He would have liked you very much, my dear. He would never have believed that you could possibly be descended from Elizabeth, of that I am certain. But dear Felix is so very like him in looks and temperament that my poor old-lady mind is often confused into thinking that I am talking with my beloved brother and not my beloved nephew.”

Georgina smiled sweetly, although she did not believe for one moment that Mirabelle Allencourt had ever suffered a moment’s confusion in her life, old lady or not.

“Thank you for helping me, Aunt Belle, especially when I have not been able to tell you much.”

“Well, maybe one day you will be able to tell me all about it.”

“Maybe one day.”

By the time Georgina had found her cousin in the garden, gently beseeching the gardener to cut her a few blooms for the little vase in her chamber, almost an hour had passed.

The moment that the gardener gave in and snipped her five very

beautiful blooms from the garden and sent her away, Georgina gave Fleur the news that there was a box of letters to go through in her room.

“Good heavens, are we to go now and look through them?” Fleur said, her face a picture of excitement.

Georgina suddenly realized that Mirabelle was right; Fleur really did wear her heart on her sleeve, and it was easy to see that the poor woman had a secret, albeit somebody else’s.

“The reason Aunt Belle is helping us is that she can read you like a book, my dear,” Georgina said gently.

“Oh goodness, I am doing it again,” Fleur said and winced, leaving Georgina inordinately grateful that her cousin already knew what she was referring to. “I really must try not to look so openly excited. For one thing, it is not very fitting for a young lady, is it? And for another, I should not want to do or say anything that would uncover Sammy’s secret.”

“My dear, you are very good. I do hope that I have not hurt your feelings.”

“No, not at all. And in any case, I daresay that Aunt Belle asked you to give me some instruction on the matter.”

“Yes, she did,” Georgina said and laughed. “But I am sure that you are perfectly capable of managing for yourself.”

“Yes, but I always welcome a gentle reminder here and there, so you must not be afraid to say it,” Fleur said and absently sniffed at the beautiful bright blooms in her hand. “Well, I shall sedately make my way to my chamber and arrange these flowers and then come to you so that we might read the letters,” she said with such a demure smile that Georgina began to laugh again. “See, I can manage,” Fleur said, and with a bright smile she turned and made her way back towards the house.

Georgina had not arrived in her chamber but two minutes when Fleur joined her. She had not even taken the lid off the little box of letters that Mirabelle had left on her bedside table for her.

“I say, it is quite a little box,” Fleur said and sounded somewhat disappointed.

“Yes, but look at this,” Georgina said when she gently removed its lid. “The letters are packed so tightly that it will not be a quick and simple task to read them.”

“Well, I suppose we ought to start,” Fleur said and drew up the little wicker chair that Georgina often sat in to look down upon the lake.

“Oh look, they are all in date order I think,” Georgina said as she settled down on the bed and reached for the first handful of letters. “Although I am bound to say that my grandmother was a very meticulous woman, and the idea of it ought not to surprise me in the slightest.”

“Who is the first one from?”

Without reading the contents, Georgina turned the letter over in her hand to see who had signed it.

“It is signed *Bea*, so I can only presume that it is Beatrice Ellington or *Montgomery*. I suppose she was Ellington back then.”

“What does it say?”

“My dear Elizabeth, forgive the brevity of this note, but there is so much happening, and I know that you will understand that my time is better spent in flattering the Earl. Cornwall is very beautiful this time of year, the scenery much more dramatic than Devonshire.

In truth, I have great hopes of making this my home and am working hard upon securing such a thing. The Earl of Wighton looks a little older than I had expected. I know he is twenty years my senior but really, he looks quite thirty years older. Still, in the great scheme of things that is neither

here nor there, and I think that it will, in the end, work in my favor, just as we had planned my dear.

Anyway, write back and tell me how it was you got on in Hertfordshire and spare me no details.

With much love,

Bea."

"The Earl of Wighton?" Fleur said thoughtfully. "I suppose that must be who she married in the end. After all, did Aunt Belle not say that your grandmother's friend Beatrice had moved to Cornwall?"

"She did indeed, Fleur. I believe you are right, and what we have here is a very thinly veiled description of her scheme, is it not?"

"Yes, an ambitious young woman, I suspect. Perhaps old Wighton's title was more important to her than the man himself."

"And I daresay that my grandmother felt the same about my grandfather."

"Oh dear, I did not mean to upset you."

"Not at all, Fleur. I had never met my grandfather, so cannot really

say what sort of man he was. He died before I was born."

"It is sad to think that he was nothing more than a target for your grandmother's ambitions, though."

"Yes, it is always a little sad, I think. But so many marriages are conducted in that way, and it is often the case that neither party has a great deal of affection for the other." Georgina shuddered. "Really, I cannot imagine such a thing. I cannot imagine anything but love as the cause of my future matrimony."

"And I feel the same. I could not possibly marry a man I did not love, and even less so one who could not love me."

"Then I suppose that neither one of us is ambitious, my dear." Georgina laughed. "And so, we are both free to marry for love."

"Yes, that is very true. I wonder who *you* will marry," Fleur said and gave a mischievous smile.

"Shall I read the next letter?" Georgina said, effectively diverting her cousin from her train of thought.

"Yes, please do."

"Oh, this is in a different hand," Georgina said, again hastening to the

end of the letter to read the signatory. “It is from a young man called David,” she remarked and raised her eyebrows high.

“Goodness me! Read it, read it!” Fleur said, clearly forgetting her determination to conceal her feelings a little better.

“My dearest Elizabeth,

I am very sorry to be addressing this to you in Hertfordshire, for it had been my dearest wish that you would not return there. I cannot believe how callous you have become; how easy it has been for you to forget our love in the sight of a greater prize.

And yet, despite my anger, I cannot help but love you still. I cannot help but harbour hope that you will let go of this foolish ambition and come home to Devonshire and to me, the man who really does love you.

I know my sister has much to do with this, and I would wish that she could be a little more loyal to me in such things. She knows how greatly I love you and yet still she pushes you towards the man she sees as better. What a curious and destructive little friendship the two of you have, and how I wish that you had never met her.

But still, had you never met my sister, you would never have met me, and I could not bear that either.

My dear Elizabeth, I beg that you would put an end to my misery and return home and let things be the way they were. I am not a poor man by any consideration, but then you know of my family's wealth. But I fear that my sister has poisoned your mind into wanting more and more from life, more of the things that are not important.

Return to me, my love, for there shall never be another woman in this world for me but you.

With all my love for as long as I live,

David."

"Oh, my goodness," Fleur said, and her beautiful blue eyes seemed to fill with tears. "That poor man. He must have known even as he was writing that the love of his life would undoubtedly marry another. Oh, what pain he must have been in."

"Indeed, he must," Georgina said, finding it only too easy to imagine that her grandmother could be so flippant with the heart of another human being. "But perhaps he had a merciful escape in the end. After all, I cannot imagine that my grandfather had a happy time of it."

"But not only that, his own sister did not stand by him. His own sister would seem to have encouraged Elizabeth away from him, thereby breaking her own brother's heart. Really, I cannot ever imagine doing

such a thing to Jeremy. As much as I might complain about him, Jeremy is my world, and I could not love him more. I could only ever want the best for Jeremy, and I could only ever imagine myself working towards finding that for him, not driving happiness away from his door."

"The more I find out about my grandmother and her friend, the less I like them."

"And I, Georgina."

"Shall I read on? Just one more before we take tea?"

"Yes, do."

"This is from Beatrice again; I can tell by the spidery handwriting," Georgina said disdainfully.

"My dear Elizabeth,

You must harden yourself to any pleas from my brother, for he will try everything to get you to come back to him. But you were never his, and he must surely know that. If the Baron continues to pay his addresses, you must forget about David and always move forward, always take the better chance. My brother will survive it, I am sure, and I will never rebuke you for your decision. Rather, I will applaud you, for did we not always say

that we would strive in this life and marry well?

You do not need my brother or his care, for you have mine. We shall always be each other's sole support in this world, as we always said we would be.

I must end now, for I am to take tea with the Earl and his mother, and I am quite certain that he intends to announce our engagement this very afternoon.

Imagine that! I shall be a Countess after all and you, my dear Elizabeth, a Baroness. And then we may leave Rowley behind forever, never to return, what do you say?

Write back to me and assure me that your plan goes well, my dear.

With much love,

Bea."

"The heartless little …" Fleur said and then covered her mouth with her hand before she could say something quite regrettable.

"Good heavens, now *there* is the sort of woman who makes one glad never to have had a sister," Georgina said forcefully. "Really, the next time I feel sorry for myself in that regard, I shall think of poor David

and his plight. Really!"

"Although I daresay all sisters are not the same," Fleur said, and they began to laugh.

"Oh, I daresay not. In truth, I think I am rather shocked by all this. Even though I knew my grandmother to be harsh, to see these words written and to see how two women can scheme together to such an extent that they care nothing for the feelings of others is quite abhorrent."

"I do not know what it all means yet, Georgina, but I think it is fair to say that those two women could come up with any scheme on earth and be assured of one another's support and absolute secrecy."

"A little like us, I daresay."

"Yes, except we have the best intentions of another at heart, not our *own* best intentions," Fleur said with quiet wisdom.

"I think we really must have tea now, my dear so that I can come to terms with what I have read."

"Yes, let us go," Fleur replied and took the letter from her cousin, placing it neatly back in the box before putting on the lid and sliding it under Georgina's bed.

Chapter 15

“Your tea, Your Grace,” Mrs Thistlethwaite said, bustling into the drawing room and setting the tray down on the table in front of him.

“Thank you, Mrs Thistlethwaite,” Emerson said with a smile. “To what do I owe the honour, my dear? After all, you do not normally bring the tea tray yourself.”

“True, Your Grace,” she said with a knowing smile. “But I did have something I wanted to ask you, and so I took the tray from the maid and told her I would bring it myself.”

“Ask away, Mrs Thistlethwaite.”

“It is nothing of concern, Your Grace, simply that I wish to inquire if you are planning to hold a summer ball here at Calder?”

“Summer ball?” Emerson said, a little wrong footed. “Oh yes, I see. My father always held a summer ball, yes,” he said almost to himself. “Well, why not? If it will not be too much trouble and too short notice for the staff, that is?”

“Nothing is too much trouble for your staff, Your Grace.”

“Still, I would not like to throw them into a flurry if it is not necessary.”

“And hopefully, *Miss Jeffries* will still be here in the middle of summer.” Mrs Thistlethwaite gave him a small smile of encouragement, almost urging him to confirm his regard for the young lady who she had no doubt witnessed arriving unannounced on more than one occasion.

“Yes, I would say so,” he said and then was waylaid by a very low feeling as he imagined her leaving Rowley and returning to Hertfordshire. “At least, I hope so.”

“She is a very pleasant young lady, Your Grace,” Mrs Thistlethwaite said tenderly. “And I think your father would have approved.”

“I hardly know, Mrs Thistlethwaite. Perhaps you would be better placed to tell me.”

“Surely not, Your Grace,” she said and laughed before busying herself with pouring him a cup of tea from the pot.

“Mrs Thistlethwaite, I think it would be true to say that *you* knew my father better than I did.”

“No, I am sure that cannot be true,” she replied in a tone which gave

her away.

“You knew him the longest.”

“Yes, but I had been in your father’s employ since he first married the Duchess,” she said and smiled, and he noted that she did not refer to the Duchess as his mother.

“Yes, and I did not come here until I was twelve, nearly thirteen.”

“Yes, but you had been unwell, Your Grace. There was nothing that anybody could do about that.”

“Mrs Thistlethwaite, you of all people must know that *that* is not true. I remember every inch of my life, every moment of it, and I have barely suffered a day’s ill-health in one-and-twenty years.”

“You must not say that to anybody,” Mrs Thistlethwaite said and suddenly sat down in the seat opposite him without any of the ordinary reverence. “Your Grace, you must *never* say it.”

“Then you know,” he said and looked into her eyes, refusing to look away. “You know all about it.”

“Hardly that, Your Grace. It is not as if the Duke came to me and explained things. But I am a servant here and loyal to this house. And

I am as loyal to you as I was to your father, believe me. But no good can come of such wondering, Your Grace."

"But Mrs Thistlethwaite, I do not even know for certain that the Duke was my father."

"He was your father, Your Grace. Really, I know he was. I knew that man as well as any servant can know their master, and I am telling you that you are his son."

"And the Duchess?" he said and studied her carefully. When she did not respond, he continued, "It is alright, Mrs Thistlethwaite. I already know that the Duchess was not my mother and did not even know of my existence. My father told me that much at least, even if he told me little else."

"Your Grace, I truly do not know what to say. I can only beseech you once again to let go of this thing, let it lay."

"Who was my mother?" he said suddenly.

"In truth, Your Grace, I have no idea. I swear to you that I would tell you now if I knew it, but I do not. You think that I had more information than I ever truly did. But all I have in reality is my own thoughts and suppositions, nothing more. But you must know that there are only Mr Murray and me here who would have the smallest

idea something was amiss. None of the other servants have been here long enough to know anything different, and I would beg you again to keep this thing quiet, to say nothing more of it, to stop thinking of it even."

"But I do not know who I am."

"You are the Duke; the son of the old Duke."

"My father said that he and the Duchess had never been able to have any children. I cannot help thinking that I could be *anybody*. I cannot help thinking that I am here simply because the two of them could not conceive a child."

"No, the Duke really was your father. I do not know who your mother was, Your Grace, but I know that there was … *Someone*," she said, and her cheeks flushed.

"Forgive me for causing you embarrassment, Mrs Thistlethwaite, but you must tell me everything."

"I do not know who the lady was, but there was something about your father in those days. He loved the Duchess, he really did, but she had become an invalid almost as soon as they were married. It was clear to everybody then that she would not live into old age and clearer still that the poor thing could do nothing more than dwell in her own

illness and unhappiness. I do not believe that there was a thing left for your father, and I cannot blame him, even if the Lord himself does, for seeking some solace elsewhere."

"But was there ever a lady you suspected?"

"No, I do not think I can ever have seen the lady. I would have known it, for I would have been able to see it in your father's eyes. All I can tell you is that he loved this woman, whoever she was. He was content in those days, but I know that it did not last long. Something had changed, and they had parted, I was sure. And I was sure because he looked so bereft; so bereft that I had wondered if the lady had died."

"And did you know that I was this lady's son? When I arrived all those years later, did he say anything to you?"

"No, your father simply repeated the history that was to be given should anybody ask. He made it very clear that we would not discuss it again beyond that day. And Mr Murray and I made it very clear that we accepted that history as truth, and that was all there was to it."

"I see."

"But I had wondered, Your Grace. I had thought back to those days and realized that you were of an age to have been born out of that old love."

“Thank you, Mrs Thistlethwaite.”

“Your Grace, please think about what I have said. Please do not disturb things, just let them be. I know that your father was a good man, and he had his reasons. But whatever those reasons, I would not wish you to hurt your own life by trying to discover them.”

“You really are very kind, Mrs Thistlethwaite,” Emerson said with a smile. “I know that I put you in a dreadful position, and I hope I have not upset you.”

“Not at all, Your Grace,” she said with a smile and rose to her feet. “So, shall I begin to make plans for the summer ball, Your Grace? Perhaps you would like some assistance with the list of guests?”

“Whenever you are ready to help me, Mrs Thistlethwaite, I shall be ready to receive your help,” Emerson said and rose to his feet and bowed at the housekeeper, smiling at her warmly. “And I shall not put you through this again.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said and nodded before turning to silently leave.

Chapter 16

“So, where is your cousin now?” Emerson said as the two of them waited for their tea and cakes to arrive.

When the Duke had responded to her letter by return of post, Georgina had felt strangely excited.

She knew it was just *Sammy*, of course, but he was still a very fine man about whom she still knew so little, and his keenness to see her had thrilled her just a little. She knew, of course, that he might merely be keen to find out what else she had discovered in her quest to help him get to the bottom of the great mystery of his life.

And yet, at the same time, he was such a fine and handsome young man that Georgina could not help letting her attention wander just a little.

He was as immaculately dressed as ever in varying shades of brown when he arrived in the tearoom, and his thick ashen hair, although tamed somewhat, still gave every appearance of making ready to break free at the earliest opportunity. When she thought how much she might have liked to run her hand through that hair, Georgina felt her cheeks flush and quickly busied herself in withdrawing the three letters from her small drawstring purse.

“My cousin is spending a happy hour or so in the haberdashery choosing some fabric and lace for a new gown.”

“I must admit to feeling a little guilty that she is always left on the outside. Still, as much as I would wish to include her and as much as I trust your judgement and do not mind how much you tell her, I am not quite sure that I am ready to speak so freely in front of another.”

“And I understand that entirely, just as my cousin would,” she said and handed him the first of the letters.

“So, these are the other letters that your Great Aunt Belle discovered, are they not?”

“It is just the first of them, Sammy,” she said and lowered her voice. “And I can assure you that Mirabelle Allencourt knows nothing of this. She knows only that I am trying to solve something that my grandmother did, but she is not pressing me for any details, so you must rest easy in that regard.”

“I trust your judgement entirely, Georgie. You are the only person in this world I *do* trust completely, and that is the truth.”

As soon as he seemed to have finished the first letter, Georgina surreptitiously took it from him and handed him the next. They

remained in an easy silence while he read all three, the only three that she and Fleur had devoured to date.

“Good heavens, that a family could behave in such a way. I cannot help but feel sorry for this David, whoever he is.”

“It may seem a little strange for me to be showing you these, but I cannot help thinking that this might have firmed up a strain of inquiry we have talked of before.”

“How so?” he said and screwed his handsome face up in confusion. There was something about the unguarded little expression that reminded her so much of the boy he had once been that Georgina had to blink rapidly. She was so touched by it that she could have cried. “I mean, surely these letters between Beatrice … Ellington, is it? Anyway, these letters were surely written many years before I was born.”

“Yes, but I think they lead me to suspect that whatever it was my grandmother knew, Beatrice knew it also. We had known them to be friends before, but such heartless schemers?”

“And it really *is* clear now that your grandmother played a great part in the earliest days of my life, is it not? I must admit when I read your letter and learned that your *grandmother* had carried me into Ashdown Manor as nothing but a babe in arms, I was quite upended by it. I

cannot imagine ever being in that woman's arms." He shuddered.

"Fear not, for I think it was the only time," Georgina said and began to laugh at his expression. "But I am afraid that you were probably in her arms longer than I ever was."

"These letters do not display your grandmother in a fine light, do they?"

"Nor her friend."

"No indeed, if anything, this Beatrice, or *Bea*, seems a good deal worse. A woman like that can only have been created by the Devil, surely?"

"Yes, and I wonder if she has enjoyed better health and longevity than my grandmother."

"You think she might still be alive?"

"There is always the hope. My only problem is that I have no idea how we are to discover it."

"I think that would be a simple enough thing. I will get my new attorney to make some inquiries in Cornwall."

“Really?”

“Yes, he does not need to know what it is about, and so there will be no suspicion. And I cannot imagine for a moment that he would begin to hazard a guess, do you?”

“Quite so,” she said and nodded.

“The two of us here making a little scheme reminds me of all those years ago when your family held that dance at Christmas, and we hatched our little plan to hide in the cupboard at the top of the stairs until it was safe to come out and peer down at them all through the stair rail,” he said and looked at her intently.

“Oh, my goodness, I had forgotten about that,” Georgina replied and smiled as the memory of childish excitement tinged with fear came back to her.

The two of them had planned the thing for days, and she had been completely surprised when they had been able to work it to perfection. They had hidden in the cupboard for no more than half an hour, but to two young children, it had felt like forever. They had giggled excitedly and hushed one another in turn, keen to chatter, and keener still not to be discovered. It had been such an exciting evening, the planning and execution of which were far more exciting than watching her family and their friends had finally turned out to be.

“I remember it so well,” he said in low tones. “It was so thrilling.”

“Yes, much more thrilling than my family’s little party seemed to be, at any rate,” she remarked, and they both began to laugh.

“I cannot thank you enough for helping me all these years later, Georgie. And all these years later I am not ashamed to tell you that you are still my only friend. I sometimes think you always shall be.”

“When you are more settled in the world and in your own heart, Sammy, you will make friends. When you realize that your place in the world is right and yours, you will be able to relax and trust again, I am sure of it. But either way, I will always be your friend, and we shall never lose touch now that we have found one another again.”

“I never forgot you, even when I began to doubt my own memories and the truth of life at Ashdown Manor; still I never forgot you. I never doubted for a moment that you existed, and I think that you were the only reason that I did not give in to it all entirely and come to believe the lie that my father had insisted upon for more than a decade.”

“Things were never the same for me after you left, Sammy. My mother tried so hard to put me in the path of girls my own age in the hopes that I would be content once more. But it was all to no avail, for I was

never content with any friend but you. I was just too sad to be able to open my heart again in friendship, and I think the acquaintances I developed over the years could feel that very clearly. As much as I bemoan my lot and say that they have wandered this way and that away from me in their search for husbands, I think that they always knew I was not a firm friend in the first place. As much as I blame them out loud, I do not blame them in my heart. I never had a true care for any of them, and I know that I have been lonely these last years because I kept myself so. There, that is my secret, Sammy. I have admitted to you what I have admitted to nobody else in this world."

"Well, to keep your secret is the very least that I can do, is it not? Especially after all that you have done for me."

"When my grandmother passed away, I had thought that there would be no impediments to our friendship anymore. If only I had realized then that we had but a few weeks left in each other's company before we would be so cruelly parted."

"I wonder if your grandmother's passing had anything to do with my departure from Ashdown Manor?" he said thoughtfully.

"Yes, I see what you mean. That it was somehow easier then for your father to send Garrett Winstanley to come and collect you. And if my grandmother had not wished it, had she still been alive, then I am sure

not even the Duke could have got past her."

"I am inclined to agree with that," he said and shuddered again. "I do not think my father would have been a match for her at all."

"Then my grandmother must surely have known the identity of your mother. And she must have known that the Duchess was not at all aware of her husband's indiscretion, and she could perhaps have held the Duke at bay with such knowledge."

"And I am sure that it would have worked entirely, for I know that he had never intended to hurt his wife with his affair. As Mrs Thistlethwaite tells me, there was a lot of sadness in my father's life and marriage, and it seems quite human that he sought solace elsewhere."

"Mrs Thistlethwaite?" Georgina said, loud enough to draw attention from two ladies taking tea clear across the other side of the room. "Oh, sorry," she said and flushed.

"Yes, forgive me; I should have mentioned it earlier. I had a heartfelt conversation with Mrs Thistlethwaite yesterday afternoon, for I have always known she could not have believed the story of my childhood illnesses for a moment."

"And she did not?"

“No, of course not. But she is as faithful to the Duchy of Calder now as she has ever been, and she was so firm in begging me to forget the whole thing that I am confident that she will never speak of it to anybody.”

“But what passed between you?” Georgina said, full of curiosity.

“Well, if we can leave your poor dear cousin another twenty minutes in the haberdashery, I will tell you,” he said with a laugh and then gently reached out to touch her hand.

Chapter 17

It was a fine, warm day for walking, and there was every sign that summer would arrive in Devonshire at any moment. And Emerson was pleased not only for his own sake but for the sake of Georgina's health, given that she was still supposed to be convalescing.

Still, it was clear that Felix Allencourt could not have objected to the idea of his young relation taking a walk along the seafront, for Georgina had responded to Emerson's brief note almost immediately and declared that she would, indeed, meet him by the Rowley pavilion at eleven o'clock.

Emerson was early, extraordinarily early, and he had already walked some way down the promenade before turning to make his way back towards the pavilion once more. In truth, he was beginning to feel a little conspicuous, exactly like a young man waiting for a young woman; a young man who was so nervous that he had arrived with an hour to spare.

Of course, nobody was really paying him any particular attention. Despite being the Duke of Calder, he was so little-known in Devonshire that he was able to stride around the little village of Rowley without drawing any attention to himself. No doubt as the years went by, and he became more established in his role, more and

more people would recognize him, and he would not find it such an easy thing to go about in blessed anonymity.

Emerson really was nervous, though, that much was true. And he knew that his nerves were certainly not connected with his discovery, the revelation of which was ostensibly the purpose of their meeting.

No, Emerson was coming to think a great deal of Georgina. Not that he had not always thought a good deal of her, but he was beginning to see her very differently. He was truly beginning to take notice of the woman his old friend had become and, with the fear of discovery all gone, and everything known between them, Emerson had been able to relax enough to see her with fresh eyes.

She really was very beautiful, with her fine pale hair and sparkling blue eyes. Her skin was a blemish-free pale peach-cream, and it seemed to glow with health, despite her recent malady. There was a straightforwardness in her manner of dress which reminded him a little of how she had been as a child.

Georgina Jeffries had never been keen on the overly fussy gowns or hairstyles, always choosing simplicity over ostentation. He remembered well how the cook or housekeeper at Ashdown Manor would try now and again to straighten a ribbon or smooth ringlets as the young Georgina flew past them on her way to the stables or the gardens. And he remembered equally well how Georgina had ducked

away from them, intent upon whatever plan she had and having no time to be beautified in preparation for it.

He laughed to himself as he turned to stare out to sea, tilting his chin so that he might feel the warmth of the sun on his face. Georgina had not changed a great deal in some respects, although it was true to say that she no longer needed her hair smoothed by a passing member of the household staff. Still, she maintained that same simplicity, only now it served to highlight her very real beauty.

Georgina Jeffries was the sort of woman who did not need anything extra to recommend her; no feathers, no floral combs, no heavy silver pendants. Her gowns were simply cut, never too revealing, and never too concealing. Whilst they did not particularly hide her curves, her gowns did not draw attention to them either.

Smiling to himself, Emerson raised a hand to his own unruly hair. His father had provided him with his own valet from the moment he had first arrived at Calder Hall. He had been attended by three different valets over the last decade, and none of them could tame his hair entirely, even when a barber had done much to thin it out.

Still, his hair notwithstanding, Emerson knew that he had come a very long way from being Samuel White. He had come to appreciate the finer things in life; smart and well-made clothing, good horses, plentiful food. And yet he had never forgotten that he had once lived

a life that was never meant to end in such things.

He had been a servant, a houseboy. He had been motherless, occasionally unkempt, and entirely illiterate. And now he was the Duke of Calder.

He had taken to his studies as a duck takes to water when Garrett Winstanley had first begun to tutor him. Of course, by the time he left Ashdown Manor, he had not been *entirely* illiterate, perhaps just semi-illiterate. After all, Georgina had done her best to help him learn, despite the fact that she had done so in secrecy. She had tried hard to be patient as he had stumbled over his letters, the two of them sitting on a fallen tree trunk in the woodland on the edge of her father's estate.

The whole business of Georgina trying to teach him to read had been so steeped in secrecy and had been so by necessity, that it had made it very difficult to be consistent. But that had not deterred Georgina in the slightest, and she was always determined and enthusiastic in her tutoring of him, even when it seemed likely that there would always be several weeks between lessons.

Emerson smiled when he remembered how impressed Garrett Winstanley had been to realize that the scruffy little servant boy he had taken into his home already knew his alphabet, even if he was not entirely sure what to do with it.

“What a clever boy you are, Emerson,” Garrett had said when the young boy, so unsure of his surroundings and uncertain of the new people in his world that he was desperately keen to please, had written out the alphabet from A to Z. “So much of the work has already been done for me. Tell me, who taught you to write the alphabet, Emerson?”

“Georgie did,” he had replied and was surprised that Mr Winstanley did not seem to know who he was talking about. “Georgie who lives at the Manor with Lord and Lady Jeffries.”

“Oh, I see. Their daughter, I presume?”

“Yes, and my friend,” young Samuel White had said vehemently.

“You understand that you are to have no contact with your friend?” Mr Winstanley went on cautiously.

“But why?” Despite his fear and uncertainty, he could not simply accept the loss of Georgie without a word.

“Because she is part of your old life, Emerson. She is from a time when you were Samuel, a very different boy. And there is no going back to that time, for you are destined for much greater things. You may not believe me now, young man, but you will one day be the

head of a very great estate, and that estate would fit Ashdown Manor inside its boundary walls many, many times over. You are beyond that life now; better than that life."

"But how can I be the head of a great estate?"

"That is all to come, Emerson. Goodness me, but you are inquisitive." Mr Winstanley had reached out and ruffled his thick hair. "In the meantime, you must simply accept things as they are. It is for the best, that much I can promise you."

"Yes, Mr Winstanley," he had said, keen to appease Mr Winstanley without giving up on Georgie.

However, he really had no idea how to maintain his friendship with Georgie. For one thing, he was not entirely sure *exactly* where he was or even how far away it was from Ashdown Manor. And whilst he knew his alphabet, he was certainly not yet in a position to be able to write a letter to his dear friend and tell her what had happened.

Perhaps Mr Winstanley would get his wish by default; the bright young boy quickly realized that he had no means at his disposal to contact Georgina Jeffries at all.

"When you grow into your new life, you will quickly forget the old one. Perhaps you should start now, forget your little friend, forget the

people you once worked with. The art of forgetting will serve you very well in your new life, young man."

"Yes, Mr Winstanley," he said, silently swearing in his heart that he would never forget Georgie for as long as he lived.

And he never had forgotten her. However life had moved on, however many of the lies that seemed to form the basis of his existence had permeated the walls of his mind and almost made themselves the truth, Georgie was the one thing to remain constant.

It was true that he had not thought of her every day, for every moment of his life after leaving Ashdown Manor seemed to have been so fully crammed with incident and activity, but he had never entirely dismissed her from his thoughts.

He had often wondered if she was still in Hertfordshire and what she had thought when he had so suddenly disappeared. But they had been childish thoughts and imaginings, even when he had become a fully-grown man, because all he had to refer to were the images of them as children, with children's faces and children's feelings and actions.

But they were not children anymore, and the image of Georgie in his mind had been firmly supplanted by the beautiful woman she had become. And he had begun to think of her almost constantly; her hair, her eyes, her smile. How clever she still was, how ready she still was

to help him.

Although his feelings were still a little confused, he knew that he felt more for Georgina Jeffries than the simple relief of an old friendship regained. When he had touched her hand in the tea room, he had felt something stir within him. The feel of her soft skin and the way she had not retracted her hand at all had excited him a little, given him hope.

But hope of what? Was it not simply the case that he was grateful to her? The only woman in the world who knew who he used to be, the only one who still remembered.

“I thought that was you,” said a bright and breathless Georgina. “Although you are a little distance from the pavilion, are you not?” she said and laughed.

“Forgive me, I was a little early and decided to walk for a while until you arrived. But I had fully intended to be back at the pavilion before eleven o’clock.” He gave her an apologetic wince.

“You need not look like that, Sammy. It is not yet eleven; in fact, it is only ten minutes to the hour. I was also early.”

Emerson liked the idea that Georgina was early. He secretly hoped that it was because she was as keen to see him as he had been to see

her. But, of course, he knew that she might merely be keen to hear all that he had discovered about Cornwall. After all, the mystery of his life and origins was nothing if not engaging.

“Ah, so you are keen to hear all that my attorney has discovered from his Cornish inquiries?” Emerson said in an amusingly tantalizing fashion.

“I most certainly am,” she said brightly, and he felt his small fears confirmed.

It really was nothing more than curiosity on her part, albeit a kind and helpful sort of curiosity.

“Well, shall we walk as we talk?” he said and held out his arm for her to take.

“Yes, indeed.”

Her hand on the inside of his upper arm felt wonderful to him. As they set off, Georgina turned to smile at him, and he found himself more mesmerized by her beauty than ever.

Georgina was wearing a dark blue gown that suited her pale colouring very well. Her thick tresses had been turned into a bun on the back of her head, with great long wavy strands framing her face and dancing

across her collarbone.

“Well, my new attorney would seem to be a very efficient man,” he began, trying to dismiss the feelings before they could entirely interfere with his train of thought. “And has already made a great many inquiries regarding the current Earl of Wighton and his family.”

“I daresay the Earl of Wighton, Beatrice’s husband, is long gone. After all, her early letters to my grandmother suggested a twenty-year difference in their ages.”

“Quite so, and he has been gone for some time, I believe.” Emerson gave a fleeting smile. “And without an heir of his own, the estate passed to his nephew.”

“So, Beatrice and Lord Wighton never had children?” Georgina said, speaking almost to herself.

“Not so, I believe there was a daughter, although my attorney has yet to discover her whereabouts. Still, given time, I think he could likely discover just about anything; he is awfully good.”

“I wonder if it helps us at all though, Sammy,” Georgina said, turning bright blue eyes up to his own.

The bright sunshine seemed to dance in those eyes just as it did in the

reflection of the still, blue sea.

“I think it does help us.”

“Yes, I suppose that the current Earl of Wighton could tell us something. Of course, it would be a little difficult to come up with a reason for asking in the first place.” She chewed thoughtfully at her bottom lip. “But I am sure we will think of something. Perhaps I could find some way to get there and simply tell him that my late grandmother and his late aunt were once such great friends. Perhaps that would do it.”

“His late aunt?” Emerson said and narrowed his gaze.

“Yes, his late aunt.” She laughed and shook her head as if he was being silly. “Beatrice Montgomery, remember?”

“Yes, yes I remember,” he said and laughed when he realized that she had made an assumption. “But she is not his *late* aunt, Georgie. Beatrice Ellington, or Montgomery, or the Dowager Countess of Wighton, is still very much alive.”

“Goodness me,” Georgina said so loudly that a young woman who was clearly a governess with two small children turned her head sharply to look in her direction. “Goodness me,” she said again, only this time in a whisper.

“Forgive me, I ought to have mentioned that from the very first.” Emerson laughed and idly watched as the governess continued away from them along the promenade, her two charges walking smartly by her sides.

“Presumably she still lives on her husband’s estate? Her nephew’s estate, I should say. Probably in the dower house if her nephew is married.”

“All that my attorney has discovered thus far is that Beatrice is still alive and living on the Wighton estate. Beyond that we have nothing. I do not know what sort of condition she is in, or what sort of man her nephew is. I daresay any move we make now is fully reliant upon the good nature or otherwise of the current Earl of Wighton.”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Georgina said, and he could not help smiling when he saw the look of interest and excitement on her face.

“I think there is a little more digging to be done before we make a firm plan, Georgie, but I thought you would like to know just what had been discovered so far.”

“Oh yes, it is all most encouraging,” she said, and she squeezed his arm a little. “It is another line of inquiry that might well lead us to your origins, Sammy.”

“For good or for ill,” he said solemnly, and when it looked as if Georgina was about to object, he went on in a much brighter tone, “oh yes, and I should like to invite you to my early summer ball. Mrs Thistlethwaite is arranging the whole thing, of course, and you will doubtless receive a proper invitation in time. But I had decided I would like to invite you for myself.”

“I should very much like to attend, Sammy.” She smiled at him warmly, her generous rosy lips drawing his eye and quickening his heartbeat. “How quickly time is flying, I can hardly believe that it is almost summer already.”

And in a few short words, Emerson was reminded that Georgina’s stay at Winton House was a temporary one which would undoubtedly soon come to an end.

Chapter 18

“I must say, I am looking forward to the Duke’s ball,” Fleur said and seemed strangely flustered.

“Are you quite sure? You seem a little upset,” Georgina said with quiet concern.

“I am not upset, my dear, just a little unsure. I think I have chosen the wrong gown altogether, and I am suddenly not at all happy with the colour of this one.” Fleur smiled self-deprecatingly.

“It suits you very well, but if you are not happy with it, you must change,” Georgina said and took her by the hand to lead her back towards her chamber. “Otherwise, you will be thinking about it all evening, and you will not know a moment’s comfort. Come, I will help you.”

Fleur really did look very pretty in the pale pink gown with lace overlay, but Georgina looked through the rail of her other gowns regardless.

“How kind of you Georgina. And I must say that I have worn this pink gown before and been perfectly happy with it so I cannot explain my aversion to it now.” Fleur laughed.

“You need not explain it at all for I know exactly what you mean. Sometimes you just cannot get comfortable in something, even something that you ordinarily like. But there is no sense in going on with it only to make yourself miserable for the rest of the evening. Now then, what about this one? Perhaps you would be happy with a richer colour like this?” Georgina smiled as she lifted down a deep plum coloured gown.

“Yes, I think I would be much happier in this one. Would you mind helping me?” No sooner had Fleur spoken than Georgina began to help her with the fastenings of the pale pink gown. “Oh, thank you. I would not want to call the maid back again for I think she is truly exasperated with me and with good cause.”

“Fear not, you will be ready in no time. I must just be careful not to disarrange your hair, for surely you must be happy with that, it looks adorable.”

“Yes, you will be pleased to know that I am extraordinarily happy with my hair,” Fleur said, and both women began to laugh. “And I must say that you look very well indeed, cousin. The Duke will not be able to resist you in so bright a blue; it matches your eyes so nicely.”

“He does not need to resist me or otherwise, Fleur,” Georgina said with comical dismissiveness. “You know very well that his interest in

me extends only to our old friendship and my current assistance and nothing more."

"I know nothing of the sort," Fleur said as she stepped into the gown that Georgina was holding out for her. "And anyway, what is your interest in him?"

"I have no interest in the Duke," Georgina said and felt her cheeks rapidly warm.

"What, none at all?" Fleur was in a mischievous mood.

"Well, of course, I have an interest in him. Sammy is my friend, after all, and I am very keen to know where he truly hailed from. There, is that interest enough for you?"

"No, quite frankly." Fleur laughed. "And I am sure you must have more than such a simple interest. After all, there is hardly a man in all of Devonshire as handsome as the Duke of Calder. His hair is wonderful, is it not?"

"Yes, it is a very fine colour, and there seems to be an awful lot of it."

"And what of his handsome face, Georgina?"

"Yes, I daresay he is a very handsome young man."

“And you are a very beautiful young woman.”

“Fleur, my dear cousin, I think you are seeing romance where there is none.”

“And I think you are determined not to see romance for some reason. I am still getting to know you, so I daresay I shall one day work out why that is. But do you not think it would simply be quicker and quieter if you just told me instead of waiting for me to work it out for myself?”

“Are you going to be impossible all evening?” Georgina said and smiled before gently turning Fleur around so that she could secure the fastenings of the new gown. “I ask merely out of practical interest.”

“Yes, I think I am going to be impossible all evening.” Fleur laughed again, and it was clear she really was in an excellent mood. “Even before all this business of Samuel White and the old Duke was known, I was very sure that Emerson Lockhart had an interest in you.”

“He did, but that was because he recognized me. Well, he recognized my name at any rate.”

“No, I think it is more than that. After all, you are not children anymore. I really do think he likes you, my dear. Is it not at least

worth thinking about?”

“But what is there to think about? It is true that we have become instantly close, but I think that is just because of our old friendship. Perhaps he would only ever see me as the friend of his early years.”

“And is that how you see him?”

“A little, I suppose.”

“Forgive me, please do not be cross, but I do not believe that for a minute,” Fleur said a little more seriously. “I think you have come to like him in his own right now, for the man he is.”

“And perhaps that is exactly how he would view it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Perhaps he would think that I only have an interest in him because he is now a man of title. After all, if he had still been a servant all these years later, any idea of romance between us would have been quite impossible. And he is such a clever young man, so very perceptive, that it would certainly cross his mind if he saw any attraction from me.”

“But do you think he would mind?”

“How could he not? After all, he is still the same person, and yet he is now socially acceptable in a way that he never was before. If I aimed to be anything other than his friend, Sammy would undoubtedly see me as a fraud; a hypocrite.”

“But you cannot know that for certain.”

“No, I suppose I cannot know for certain. But those sorts of thought cloud things, do they not? Perhaps it would be better for me to help Sammy get to the bottom of it all before I wonder too much at my own feelings for him.”

“Then you do have feelings for him,” Fleur said quietly although with equal determination.

“Yes, I do,” Georgina said and smiled, quickly realizing that the only way to satisfy her cousin was to agree with her.

And it was all true, of course. Georgina had been affected by his handsome face from the first time she had seen him as a grown man at the garden party. Before she had any inkling as to his real identity, Georgina had been drawn to him. When he had sat by her side in the assembly rooms as the musicians had played, she had been very pleased with his attention.

But had she simply been pleased because a Duke had never paid her such attention before? In fact, nobody had paid her such attention before, not a Duke, not an Earl, not a Baron, not a common man.

“Forgive me, I am being a little forceful in my opinions,” Fleur said suddenly. “I think it is the idea that the two of you have come together again after all these years that set me to thinking that there could be a great romance here. It would be a very fine story, would it not?”

“I daresay it would.” Georgina laughed and quickly straightened Fleur’s gown. “There, you are complete my dear.”

“Thank you, Georgina.”

“I will not lie to you and say that I do not feel anything for Sammy because I do. I daresay it is hard to discuss because I do not quite understand the nature of those feelings just yet. But if and when I do, I promise that you will be the first to know.”

“I would expect nothing less.” Fleur smiled brightly.

“But in the meantime, I think we are going to need to set aside such things. After all, we need to find some means of propelling ourselves in the direction of Cornwall, and I have no idea how we are to do it. Sammy will have to help us work something out, and I think we will

all need very clear heads for such an undertaking."

"You mean to take me with you? To question Beatrice Ellington? Really?" Fleur's blue eyes were round with excitement.

"Of course I mean to take you with me. How could I possibly manage it without you, Fleur?"

Fleur immediately flung her arms around her cousin, so unexpectedly that Georgina felt a little off balance.

"Now you will have us both disarranged." Georgina laughed but returned her cousin's embrace with equal enthusiasm. "Come, let us make our way down to the carriage for I am sure that your father and brother must be tired of waiting for us."

In actual fact, neither Felix nor Jeremy were at all tired of waiting for them. They gave no indication of frustration whatsoever, and both simply smiled and made noises of appreciation when the two women finally glided down the staircase.

Mirabelle saw them off in the entrance hall, fending off all attempts to get her to change her mind and attend the ball to which she had also been invited.

The four of them made a merry little party as they drove in Felix's

carriage to Calder Hall. Jeremy was in high spirits, teasing both girls about the handsome Duke as always. And Felix seemed much more relaxed on this occasion, no doubt boosted by his two recent visits to the Duke's fine home.

"Well, here we are. I say, what a queue!" Jeremy said brightly when the carriage drew up at the front of Calder Hall to join so many others. "Even more guests than were invited to the garden party, I should not wonder."

As Felix helped Georgina down from the carriage, she looked towards the brightly lit open doorway at the top of the immense stone steps. It stood out clearly against the falling dusk, and her eyes immediately flew to Sammy.

He stood greeting his guests, smiling and seeming much more at ease with himself than he had done on the day of the garden party. And his ease had added even more to his handsomeness, his all-encompassing attractions.

It was clear that Georgina was not the only young lady in Devonshire to have noticed those attractions. She quickly realized that the queue was ever deepening on account of a never-ending stream of hopeful young ladies and their even more hopeful parents. No doubt Sammy was being regaled with tales of how wonderful each and every young lady was, not just in terms of beauty, but in all manner of fine

character traits which would be just the thing for a duchess.

And the young ladies really were very beautiful.

For the first time in a long while, Georgina felt somewhat unsure of herself. It was not a sentiment she was much given to, and she surprised herself by looking down at her gown and wondering if she did not suddenly feel a little of what Fleur had felt earlier on; that she had not chosen quite right and that she would be uncomfortable about it all evening.

She shook her head as if to dispel it, annoyed with herself for such a silly, girlish thought. And yet, the same time, she could not help wondering what conversations took place just a few feet away at the top of the stone steps. Was Sammy impressed? Was he finally coming to terms with his role as the new Duke of Calder and realizing what great advantages came along with the title?

Surely any young man of just one-and-twenty would be flattered by the adoring glances of so many carefully turned out young ladies. She could hardly think that there was a man alive who would not be so impressed that his head could be easily turned in the direction of any one of them.

The thought of it laid her suddenly very low, and Georgina wanted to be somewhere else altogether. If the Duke of Calder, Sammy, *her*

Sammy, was about to fall in love with somebody very beautiful, she did not want to be there to see it. It mattered not that he was her friend, her oldest friend, for she could not be pleased for him at that moment.

Instead, she studied his face for any sign that he had changed, that he had formed some instant regard for the young lady with whom he was currently exchanging pleasantries, or the young lady who had gone before her, or the one before her. And what of the many others who would come after?

Georgina would be but one of many and, as she looked down at her gown once more, she would undoubtedly be the most plainly dressed of them all.

Perhaps there would be little opportunity for them to discuss any plans for Cornwall that night. After all, they were not in the tea rooms in Rowley now but at a ball being hosted by the Duke of Calder himself. He was the host, the man that everybody had come to see. The man that everybody had come to impress.

It was the first time that Georgina had truly considered Sammy as the Duke of Calder. Yes, she had known it all along, but he had still been Sammy then. Surely, he was still Sammy now, but she could not help letting her imagination run away with her.

At that moment, Georgina wished that he had never gone up in the world at all. If only he was still a servant, the young man would not be of any interest to the beautiful young ladies who seemed to surround him now.

And the fact that she knew that her sudden wish was so selfish served only to make her feel even worse.

Chapter 19

When Georgina appeared in front of him and performed a neat little curtsy, Emerson had been entirely surprised to see her there. He had not noticed her in the queue at all, even though he had been eagerly awaiting her appearance.

Still, he had felt almost ambushed in the entrance hall, surrounded by faces he did not know, all of whom seemed to be intent upon his fullest attention. It was not an entirely new thing, of course. Even before he had become the Duke, when his father had begun to introduce him to the world outside of school and university, young ladies had taken an interest. But he had been shrewd enough even then to know why.

He knew it was just the way of things, and he always had, but Emerson could not trust the world *just as it was*. Had he still been a servant somewhere, Emerson would have been of little interest to any but those of his own station, and even then, perhaps not. After all, he would not have had the funds for such fine clothes and a barber and valet to keep on top of his wayward hair. He would look very different. He would look like a servant.

And there was not one young lady present in his ballroom who would have given him a second glance. As it was now, they seemed unable to

look away.

“Good evening, Miss Jeffries,” he said, just stopping himself calling her *Georgie* at the very last minute. “And Mr Allencourt, Miss Allencourt, how are you both?”

“Good evening, your Grace,” Georgina said so quietly she was almost mute.

“Very well, your Grace, I thank you,” Felix Allencourt said and bowed deeply.

“Ah, and good evening to you, Sir.” Emerson smiled and bowed when he saw Jeremy Allencourt bringing up the rear of the little party.

Jeremy beamed back and bowed deeply, looking every bit like a young man who was intent upon enjoying the evening to its fullest. There was something very carefree about Jeremy Allencourt, something that Emerson would not have minded for himself.

It was clear that the young man had an attractive personality and an element of fun about him. For a moment, he mused on the idea that Jeremy Allencourt might have made a fine friend for him indeed if Emerson were not so perpetually concerned by discovery and vigilant about every word he spoke unless he was with Georgie.

“Thank you kindly for inviting us this evening, your Grace,” Felix Allencourt spoke again. “And it appears that you have a good number of guests waiting.” He smiled knowingly, and Emerson was suddenly so grateful to be in the company of an undemanding man that he reached out and patted him on the shoulder.

“Please do enjoy yourself, Mr Allencourt. All of you,” he said and smiled from one to the other, all the while wanting to single Georgie out in particular. “I shall find you in the course of the evening.”

Georgina nodded and smiled a little vaguely before taking Felix’s proffered arm and heading off in the direction of the ballroom. She seemed a little distracted, and Emerson hoped that there was nothing wrong.

Apart from her distraction, she looked as beautiful as he had ever seen her, more so. Her gown was a soft velvet affair in a bright shade of blue, almost the same as her eyes. The neck of the gown was wide and revealed the creamy skin of her collarbone and a little of her shoulders. And there was the vaguest hint of scent on her skin, so vague he could barely detect it. He was sure it was Jasmine or something similar, and its very faintness was tantalizing. He breathed deeply, feeling almost as if he were chasing the scent in the hope of catching it.

The moment she wandered away from him, Emerson reluctantly

turned back to the next of his guests and groaned silently and inwardly when he saw yet another hopeful and extraordinarily overdone young lady blinking hard, her wide eyes intending to convey a certain comely innocence.

Not another one!

It took almost another hour before he was free from the arduous task of greeting his guests. If only they would simply wish him a good evening so that he might wish them the same, and then move on into the ballroom to partake of the wonderful food and drink that Mrs Thistlethwaite had worked so hard to oversee.

Already several dances had taken place, and Emerson felt the weight of eyes upon him, hopeful young ladies and expectant parents all waiting for him to make his choice. He knew that he would have to dance with several young ladies or risk upsetting half of the county. But he did not want to make his first choice any other than Georgina.

If he picked any other young lady for his first dance of the evening, much emphasis would be placed upon it by all around him.

“Georgie, forgive my absence,” he whispered his rush of words directly into her ear the moment he saw her, startling her entirely.

Once again, he caught the vaguest hint of jasmine in the air and knew

that he had not been mistaken.

“Your Grace,” she said, her blue eyes wide. “You startled me.”

“Forgive me, Miss Jeffries,” he said and looked around for any sign that he had been overheard calling her Georgie. “I have been tortured in the doorway for an hour.” He was whispering again.

“Tortured?” she said, and the expression on her face made him laugh.

“Everybody’s father wants an audience with me,” he said with a great sigh. “And I have not yet developed the skill with which to gently extricate myself from tedious yet forceful company.”

“Oh, dear me,” Georgina said and laughed, although he was not entirely sure that the distraction he had perceived earlier had evaporated entirely. “Perhaps that ought to have been the first thing that your father taught you.”

“If it had been the *only* thing he had taught me, I would be grateful.”

“I suppose such great interest in you is to be expected. You are the Duke, after all,” she said, and as she looked vaguely around the ballroom, he thought he detected an uneasiness in her manner.

“I suppose so,” he said with a shrug. “But will you dance with me? For

my first dance, I mean."

"Yes, of course," she said and smiled at him.

"For you can only imagine how I would have to duck and weave the advances of the father of any other young lady I choose to dance with first."

"Quite." And with that, her smile disappeared altogether.

"Forgive me, Georgie." He was whispering again. "I had not meant my request to sound so very self-serving. It really would be my pleasure, I assure you."

"Really, there is no offence," she said and gave him the sort of smile which suggested that she really *was* offended but was trying her very best to hide it.

"I would not hurt your feelings for a kingdom."

"And you have not, so it is a good thing." Once again, he was not convinced.

No young lady, he supposed, would be pleased to be asked to dance under such circumstances. No young lady would be pleased to be nothing more than his saviour from the intentions of all the other

ladies and their desperate fathers. It was hardly flattering, and yet his own meaning could not have been further from his words.

He had blundered, that was for certain, but Emerson was certain that Georgina could only be offended as any other young lady would be offended in the circumstances. He could not begin to imagine for a moment that she harboured any of the feelings for him that he had come to experience for her.

After all, why would she? She knew what he was. She knew, as all the others did not, that he was no better than a servant. And despite their great friendship of childhood, Emerson did not fool himself that the two of them would have grown up and retained that friendship if he had simply remained a servant at Ashdown Manor.

As Georgina Jeffries had grown into a young woman, she would have easily seen the great differences between them. Differences that she perhaps did not quite imagine now, although he was sure that the thought would be in there somewhere.

If he had still been a servant in her father's employee, Georgina would likely have grown to despise him a little. Perhaps not despise the man himself, but rather his station in life. It was the way of things.

Of course, things were different now; he was the Duke of Calder. And yet he could not help feeling that he perhaps was not the man he

thought he was. His whole life had been a lie, even when he had been a child and had known no different, it had been a lie nonetheless.

How could he trust that he truly was the rightful Duke? In the end, he could not say for certain that he was not merely the orphan that Baroness Elizabeth Jeffries had claimed him to be, the child for whom there was no room at the Hatfield orphanage, the child she had reluctantly agreed to shelter as one of her own servants.

If their investigations brought them hard up against that one potential, then Georgina would know it. Even if they kept it all quiet, and he retained his title, still *she* would know it. Would she despise him then as she would surely have done had he never left Ashdown Manor? Perhaps; perhaps not.

Emerson knew that he would have to keep his feelings lashed down now. At the very least, he needed to know who he was before he thought about what else life might have to offer him.

He could not risk telling Georgina of his feelings now only to offend her and lose her friendship. For with any loss of friendship would be an accompanying loss of assistance. He could not do this without her; without Georgina, he would never know who he was.

As he stared out across the immense and brightly lit ballroom, his gaze settling upon one of the countless twinkling chandeliers, Emerson

knew that his own identity must come first. He could not take another step in life without knowing.

He could not declare his feelings for Georgina or any other young lady for that matter. He would not rest easy until he had the certain knowledge that he truly did have every right to offer them the title of Duchess, not to mention his undying love.

In the event, he danced the first two with Georgina, much to the disappointment of many a young lady in the ballroom. But if they had studied Georgina as he had, they might not have been quite so disappointed, for she looked as if she had hardly enjoyed a minute of it.

He had tried to maintain some small conversation with her as they danced but had never found dancing and talking particularly easy, especially with a dance where the couples were so regularly separated in their steps.

Of course, the moment he had finished dancing with Georgina, he felt the great weight of expectation from the entire room that he should divide the rest of his time amongst the remainder of the young ladies.

Georgina, for her part, hardly seemed to notice how many people took a greater interest in her now that she had danced the Duke's first two dances with him. Many eyes were on her now and all of them full of

curiosity.

Over the course of the dancing, he lost sight of her several times and knew that he could not look for her without causing great offence to whichever dancing partner he had.

Emerson very quickly realized that hosting a ball was a most exasperating affair when a man had one person in particular with whom he wished to converse. As the host, he knew now that that was not going to be possible.

He also knew that he had offended Georgina, and his agitation grew and grew as he searched for some way to spend at least a few minutes with her so that he might apologize.

When the evening was beginning to draw to a close, and he was finally free from more dance partners than he had ever imagined possible, he darted over to Felix Allencourt's party. It was with some dismay that he noted Georgina's absence, and he surreptitiously looked this way and that in fear of seeing her fully engrossed in another's company. And who could blame her?

"Your Grace, Georgina is just taking a little air," Fleur Allencourt said in a whisper and raised her eyebrows significantly.

"Oh, I see." He smiled awkwardly, immediately realizing he was the

subject of her scrutiny.

Fleur Allencourt was quiet and shy, but that certainly did not mean that she was not also wise and shrewd. She had seen his desperate look and judged it correctly for what it was.

“I think she went out through the morning room,” Fleur continued with her eyebrows rising higher and higher as she spoke.

Without another word to him, she managed to expertly engage her father and brother in a conversation so instantly enthralling that he was able to slip away without their notice. What a very fine ally Fleur Allencourt could be to a person.

As he hurriedly strode out through the ballroom, Emerson was careful not to make firm eye contact with any of his guests, lest they see it as an opportunity, nay an *invitation*, to embark upon some lengthy conversation that he simply did not want. He wanted only to be out of the hall and in Georgie’s company.

Emerson darted into the morning room, pleased that he could see by the light of the moon without having to search for a candle and matches. Just as he had pushed the door closed behind him, he realized that Georgina was making her way back in through the French window from outside. The moment she realized she was not alone, Georgina shrieked.

“No, no!” he said hurrying towards her. “It is only me. It is Sammy,” he said and laughed.

“Goodness me, you nearly scared me out of my wits,” she said and slapped his upper arm quite hard.

“Ouch,” he said and rubbed at the smarting flesh by instinct.

“Oh, forgive me,” she said and raised both hands to her mouth. “Goodness me, I did not mean to do that.” He could see her shoulders shaking in the darkness and realized that she was laughing.

He began to laugh too; amusement mixed with the greatest relief that she did not hold any of the offence that had so marred their dancing.

She had merely struck out at him in the same way she would have done when they were children. That thoughtless call to action that a child could not control but a fine young lady ought to.

“Well, that has brought back a flood of memories,” he said through his laughter. “I can only think that you have struck me in just such a way many, many times before.”

“Perhaps I have,” She replied and touched a gloved finger to the corner of her eye to dash away a tear of mirth. “Perhaps that was why

it came so naturally."

"Still, I am sorry to have frightened you so."

"Yes, you did rather," she said, her breathing and speech beginning to settle once again. "But what on earth were you doing creeping around in the dark like that?"

"I was in search of you, Georgie," he said and took a step towards her.

For a moment, he was in the grip of an irresistible urge to take her into his arms and kiss her. His relief that their friendship was not destroyed was so great that he was very nearly carried away on a great wave of thoughtless irresponsibility. It was an irresponsibility that he only shook himself out of at the last possible moment.

"I see," she said in a hoarse whisper.

"Georgie, I had wanted to apologize. I know that I offended you earlier, and there is nothing that you can say, no objection that you might make, which will persuade me otherwise. But I *am* sorry, for I did not mean it quite as it sounded. I would have asked you to dance with me anyway, with or without my need of a saviour from so many interested ladies."

"*So* many?" Georgina said, and it was clear from her tone that she was

teasing him.

“Yes, absolutely hordes of them,” he said and gave a comically exaggerated shrug. “Too many to count really.”

“Be careful I do not strike you on the arm again, Samuel White.” She laughed before becoming quite serious. “But I am sorry that I took offence as easily as I did. I do not know what came over me this evening, but I should have known by instinct and experience that you would have intended no such offence. There are so many very beautiful young ladies here this evening that I find myself perhaps a little envious. I realize that I have not paid such great attention to my own appearance and find that it has made me a little conscious and sensitive. Forgive me.”

“You did not need to spend a moment longer on your appearance, Georgie,”he said and realized that he was getting dangerously close to making some admission or other; the sort of admission that he knew he must not yet make.

“Thank you, Sammy. You are very kind.”

“I should not like to lose you. Not again.”

“You shall not lose me, Sammy,” she said, and he could almost feel her relaxing. “Especially not now when we have a great many plans to

make."

"Plans?"

"Yes, we must come up with some scheme to get us to Cornwall, Sammy. I have thought about the thing over and over again, and there is nothing else for it. We really must speak to Beatrice Ellington."

"Yes, but how to do it, that is the thing," he said and was surprised by his amusing tone.

They had settled back down again, overcoming whatever little obstacle had just arisen between them. Things were different, but only a little, and he realized that they could continue much as before.

And he knew that she had sensed it as much as he had, for she was suddenly intent to bring them back to their ordinary footing.

And for himself, he was glad that they were back to themselves. He did not want to risk losing her again, even if it meant he never truly told her how he was feeling.

Chapter 20

After a great deal of teasing from Jeremy, Georgina and Fleur finally climbed into the carriage to make their way over to Calder Hall for afternoon tea. It had been three days since the summer ball, and the Duke had made his invitation to Georgina and Fleur by messenger.

Having invited both young ladies, it was quite natural and acceptable that he had not invited the rest of the family. By implication, it was to be a much less formal affair than their last afternoon at Calder had been; simply a meeting of young people.

Of course, Felix Allencourt would no doubt suspect that the Duke had an interest in Georgina. After all, it would seem to be the only explanation. And the fact that Fleur had been invited as an acceptable chaperone to her cousin was also quite natural.

Despite the fact that these were not precisely the circumstances, that particular narrative seemed to sit well with all involved.

“I must admit that I feel a little nervous, Georgina,” Fleur said when their carriage drew up outside Calder Hall.

“Nervous? But why?”

“Because I have not really spent a good deal of time in conversation with the Duke. I am usually hiding out in the haberdashery or the tea room, all the while pretending that I do not know anything about his circumstances. But now, especially if we are to be only a party of three, my knowledge can hardly be politely disregarded, can it?” She paused for a moment and took a great steadying breath. “I suppose I just feel a little bit embarrassed, that is all.”

“I see what you mean,” Georgina said when they had both been helped down from the carriage. She laced her arm through her cousin’s. “Just remember, Sammy will probably be feeling exactly the same way. And you are both of such wonderfully pleasant and amenable natures that you will undoubtedly put each other at ease almost immediately.” Georgina laughed and led Fleur up the great stone steps.

“Good afternoon, Miss Jeffries.” Mr Murray, the butler, smiled warmly. “And good afternoon, Miss Allencourt.”

“Good afternoon,” both young women chorused in unison.

“His Grace is in the drawing room already if you will follow me.”

As the three of them waited for tea to be served, they talked superficially of the ball and the weather and the propensity for gardeners to be extraordinarily territorial. It was as if they hung in

stasis as they waited for a clear opportunity to speak openly, the three of them all together for the first time.

Finally, Georgina began to feel a little nervous herself, wondering how her cousin and her old friend would manage. Still, she need not have bothered, for they quickly settled into an easy way as soon as the maid had finished with the tea and left them alone.

“I must first thank you, Miss Allencourt, for your continued discretion in the matter of my complicated origin,” Emerson said with a warm smile. “I cannot tell you how greatly I appreciate it.”

“And you may be assured of my discretion, Your Grace, forevermore,” Fleur responded shyly.

“But now we three must put our heads together and put the finer points on a little plan I have for getting us to Cornwall without causing too much of a stir,” Emerson went on.

Georgina remained silent for a few moments, hoping that such a silence would encourage further conversation between Fleur and Emerson.

“You have a plan worked out already, Your Grace?” Fleur’s customary excitement was back, and Georgina could have exclaimed in relief. “I say, that is very clever of you. But what is it? What is your plan?” As

Fleur sat forward in her seat, Georgina entirely recognized the motion.

Fleur had instantly forgotten her embarrassment and misgivings and had chosen to chase her naturally inquisitive nature instead. The Duke had a tale to tell, and Fleur Allencourt was certainly all ears.

“Well, I have recently swapped a little correspondence with the current Earl of Wighton,” Emerson began, and both young women looked at him with great interest. “I had meant to tell you at the ball that I had written off to him, but there never seemed to be an opportunity.” He gave Georgina a rueful smile which she secretly returned.

“But what did you write? Surely you did not give the whole thing away?” Fleur went on, any hint of nervousness now entirely evaporated.

“I did not give away anything of my own circumstances, Miss Allencourt, but I did give away a little of Georgina’s connection to the Dowager Countess.” He turned to look at Georgina. “I hope you do not mind.”

“No, not in the least,” Georgina said and shook her head vigorously, keen to hear the rest.

If she was honest, Georgina felt curiously excited. The idea that she

might have the chance to speak with Beatrice and find out a little more had her in its grip, although she could not help feeling it perhaps a little indecent. After all, it was not a game; Sammy needed to know who he was.

And yet, however she tried to chastise herself, Georgina could not deny her high spirits.

“As I said before, my new attorney has done sterling work in researching the residents of Wighton Hall in Cornwall. The current Earl of Wighton is Oscar Montgomery, the nephew of the previous Earl. Oscar is a man approaching fifty who has been the Earl these last twenty-five years since Beatrice’s husband passed away. Beatrice is still in residence, but not in the dower house. She lives in the main hall, so I can only assume that her health is failing.”

“Good heavens, your attorney *is* good. How on earth has he managed to find out that Beatrice resides in the hall itself?” Georgina said in admiring tones.

“Oh, no. I found that out,” Emerson said with such a bright and beaming smile of pride that Georgina laughed. “Well, I did!” he went on.

“Forgive me, you just reminded me of the boy for a moment instead of the man.” Georgina continued to laugh.

“Well, I know this is an exercise in discovering who I truly am and is therefore somewhat solemn, but it is also a little exciting, is it not?”

“I suppose it is. And I am glad that you see it that way.” Georgina studied him carefully, marvelling at how his feelings and curious excitement had mirrored her own.

They really did seem to be as in tune as adults as they had been as children. There were differences, of course, not least of them being the curious sensation of falling backward through the air every time she looked into his green eyes or imagined reaching out to touch his silvery brown hair.

“How did you find out about it all then, Your Grace?” Fleur said, keen to get to the nuts and bolts of it all.

“The Earl of Wighton put it all in his letter to me. To be honest, it was not something that I asked, he just gave the information freely. Anyway, I wrote to him to explain that a dear friend of mine, who lost a most *beloved* grandmother some years ago, has lately discovered the existence of her grandmother’s best friend, Beatrice, and would be very keen to meet her.”

“A most *beloved* grandmother?” Georgina said with a rueful smile and raised her eyebrows.

“Yes, I know it was something of a stretch, Georgie.”

“An incredible stretch.” She laughed. “But I am bound to say an inspired one. So, are we to take it that the current Earl of Wighton would not be averse to a visit?”

“Fortunately, he would seem to be the sort of man whose esteem would ride high forevermore for having had a Duke stay in his residence.” Emerson shrugged and then leaned his head against the high-back of the armchair.

“Oh dear,” Georgina said uncertainly.

“But fortunately, he is a man who has only sons, so that is something.” As Emerson spoke quite seriously, Georgina allowed herself an inward sigh of relief.

For an awful moment, she had thought she would make it all the way to Cornwall only to have to suffer the same feelings she had felt at the summer ball. She knew it was silly, of course. She had felt as relieved as Emerson when they had silently agreed to put it all behind them.

But it was still there, the idea that he was a young, handsome Duke, a man in demand who could marry anybody he chose.

“So, he has extended an invite, Your Grace?” Fleur said, her little nose twitching like a rabbit.

Georgina immediately realized that Fleur was keen to get to the part where she discovered whether or not she was to be in the party. Georgina truly hoped she was, for she distinctly remembered promising her that very thing.

“Yes, he has,” Emerson said with his broad and handsome smile evident once more. “For an entire week.”

“An entire week?” Georgina said with surprise.

“Yes, a week which will, unfortunately, culminate in two very tedious social engagements undoubtedly designed to show off the Earl’s new acquaintance.”

“There, see? Sooner or later the title of Duke was bound to come in handy, Sammy.”

“Very funny.” He returned her mischievous smile with one of his own, his green eyes staring into hers in a way which made her feel lightheaded.

“And we will get to speak to Beatrice?”

“Yes, in fits and starts, I believe,” he continued as he leaned forward in his chair and reached out to touch the side of the teapot with the back of his hand. “Cold,” he said and rose to his feet to cross the room and pull the bell rope for another tea tray.

“In fits and starts?”

“From what I can make out, the Dowager Countess’ health is such that only short visits are advisable.”

“Oh, I see.” Georgina could not help hoping that the Dowager Countess, a woman she now began to suspect was very frail, would at least cling onto life for long enough that they might get some useful truths from her.

She knew it was not a particularly charitable thought, but every time she thought of Beatrice Ellington, or Beatrice Montgomery as she now was, she could not help thinking of David, the brother she had helped to betray.

“Well, I suppose now all that remains is for us to come up with some reason for going to Cornwall that would be suitable for my father,” Fleur said and winced. “For if he is not satisfied with the explanation, there is a very good chance we will not be going at all.”

“Fear not, Miss Allencourt. I have a plan.”

Chapter 21

By the time the Duke had arrived at Winton House, and they were all settled in the drawing room drinking tea, still, Georgina's nerves had not improved. She had felt them most dreadfully all morning as she wondered if the whole thing really would go to plan just as Sammy said it would.

For one thing, Felix Allencourt was nobody's fool. If he suspected any untruths in the account that Emerson Lockhart gave him, he would not allow Georgina and Fleur to accompany him to Cornwall, Duke or not.

Still, that particular Duke had come up with a plan, one which would seem to soften the blow and add a certain legitimacy to the excursion. And not only legitimacy but most appropriate chaperone.

It was clear to Georgina that Fleur had suffered a similar bout of nerves, given that she had spent the entire morning preparing the drawing room for the Duke's arrival.

Of course, to all present, that would have looked quite natural. After all, whilst the Allencourt family had attended Calder Hall for tea, the Duke himself had never come to Winton House. The fact that Fleur flew around the room with her perpetual straightening and setting out

of vases of flowers that she had picked from the garden without once seeking the gardener's approval, looked to all but Georgina to be nothing more than commonplace excitement.

But Georgina knew that her cousin was not nervously trying to impress the Duke of Calder with vases of hastily cut roses. Fleur had merely been looking for an outlet for her nervous excitement. She really did wear her heart on her sleeve as Great Aunt Belle had said, and Georgina silently prayed that Fleur would do nothing to give them away.

And at least Great Aunt Belle would not be there for the afternoon since she was having afternoon tea with Lady Maud Aston in Rowley. That really was a great mercy, for Mirabelle was no fool either.

She would only need to hear the name of the Earl of Wighton to realize that their interest in Beatrice Ellington still persisted. Whilst that was not a great problem in itself, that sharp and shrewd old lady would finally realize that there was a further connection in this little conundrum, a connection that led to the Duke of Calder. Perhaps she would not be quite so keen to leave things be as she had before. Perhaps she would not be quite so keen to help without questioning, to keep quiet and not make trouble for them.

Of course, it was very likely that Mirabelle Allencourt would easily find the thing out over the next few days, especially if Felix allowed

them to go. But at least the Duke would not be there in the room when she discovered it, and Georgina decided that she would simply have to address the matter as and when it arose.

As the Duke began to relay his well-rehearsed little speech about his acquaintance, the Earl of Wighton, and his invite to the Duke and any party he wished to bring with him, Georgina could hardly look at him.

But she knew she must, for to not do so would draw a very different kind of attention and perhaps even a little suspicion from her father's cousin. Felix, for his part, simply leaned back in his chair with his cup and saucer suspended mid-air as he listened with interest. He certainly showed no signs of suspicion, although Georgina knew that *that* was not necessarily a sign that he did not harbour any.

"So, it is something of a grand party?" Felix asked with interest.

"Yes, the Earl has two sons a little older than me, and they have a great many friends who will be in attendance. There will be others from the county, of course, but since his invitation extends to a party of my own choosing, I thought of your family, Sir."

"Indeed." Felix nodded slowly as he digested the information.

"I thought perhaps it might be a jollier party than if I simply wrote off to an old school friend or two to invite them, you see." Georgina

realized that Sammy's delivery was so good because it was largely the truth.

He had not merely given the *impression* that he did not have appropriate friends to ask for the sake of their little mission; the truth of the matter was that Emerson Lockhart did not have close friends.

"And I daresay it is a little short notice to write off to your old friends and get a response in time," Felix said and nodded sagely.

"Quite so, so I wondered if your son and daughter and Miss Jeffries might enjoy such an excursion."

At the mention of himself, Jeremy Allencourt sat up a little straighter and began to take better notice. He looked across at Georgina and narrowed his eyes as if he suspected something that he could not quite put his finger on. And yet he did not look at all perturbed by it, but rather excited.

The Duke, Fleur, and Georgina had discussed the thing at length over tea at Calder Hall, and in the end, it had been decided that to ask Jeremy would be the surest way to get Felix to agree to it all. It had been Emerson's idea, an idea which Georgina had initially opposed.

But Emerson had quickly persuaded her that there was no other way. He realized that there was a great chance that he would have to do

some explaining to the smart, intelligent young man, but he assured them both that it was a risk he was willing to take.

And Fleur, who knew Jeremy better than anybody, easily assured them that, as silly as he could sometimes be, Jeremy was the sort of young man who would take somebody else's secret to the grave.

"Well, I must say that it is very kind of you to think of the young people of Winton House, Your Grace. I am sure that they are all champing at the bit for me to agree to it all, so I will quickly put them out of their misery," Felix said and looked from Jeremy to Fleur to Georgina and back again. "I hope that you will all have a wonderful time," he said, and his decision was made.

"Then that is settled, Mr Allencourt. I shall write back to Lord Wighton tomorrow morning and accept his invitation. I will make all the arrangements for travel, and we shall take the largest of my carriages for the journey."

Georgina felt her spirits soar when she realized that the very thing she had hoped for would come to pass. Within a week, they would be making their way to Cornwall and Beatrice and perhaps one or two answers. It was beginning to become as important to Georgina to find out who Sammy really was as it was to Sammy himself.

Surreptitiously, Georgina allowed her eyes to stray to Fleur. A certain

amount of excitement would be expected, of course, but this was one of those moments when Fleur might easily give herself away, as well as Georgina.

However, Fleur sat neatly in her chair with her hands in her lap and a demure expression on her face. Georgina almost laughed when she thought of what it must be costing her cousin to sit still and say nothing at that moment.

“I wonder if Miss Jeffries would care to show me your grounds and gardens, Mr Allencourt?” the Duke said, and Georgina suddenly focused.

“Georgina?” Felix turned to look at her.

“Yes, of course,” she said and rose to her feet.

As she made to leave the room, she caught Jeremy’s eye. He smiled at her warmly, but there was something of a knowing look, a silent teasing. As subtle as it was, Georgina felt her cheeks warm as they blushed, and she found herself scurrying out of the drawing room.

Of course, Felix would also be thinking much the same. The Duke had paid her enough attention in the last weeks that anybody would easily assume that such interest was purely romantic.

He had joined her to listen to the musicians in the assembly rooms, he had invited her family for afternoon tea, he had danced with her twice at his own ball, and now he was inviting her and her cousins to join him on a trip to Cornwall. Of course, her father's cousin would think his interest romantic, who would not?

"Well, what do you think?" he said the moment they were alone outside.

"I think you did it very well indeed," Georgina said and then pointed around the side of the house. "Let us take that path to the camellias."

"Very well," he replied and held his arm out for her to take in a habit that was becoming most natural.

"I am certain that Fleur is right, and Jeremy will not let you down, Sammy."

"I am equally certain, Georgie. If he is anything like his sister, then I do not have a moment's worry."

"But I am bound to say that it is a case of *when* you will have to tell him something and not *if*," she went on as they walked slowly along a rambling path surrounded by tall lupins and foxgloves.

Every time she closed her eyes, Georgina could detect the scent of

stocks. She was not entirely sure where they were but knew they must be there somewhere in amongst the foxgloves. It was such a sweet smell, and it suited the warmth of the summer afternoon perfectly.

“Yes, it is clear that he is a very intelligent man, so I am ready to give him an explanation.”

“But is this not becoming everything that you feared? First, *I* discover you, and Fleur is aware, and now Jeremy will know everything. Not to mention the fact that Great Aunt Belle, whose suspicions are already heightened, will undoubtedly discover that we are to attend the home of Lord Wighton and realize some connection to Beatrice.”

“I suppose it really is everything that I had dreaded for so long. But now I must know, you see. Now that things are moving in a direction I had never dared to dream of, I could not go back. Georgina, I do not want to live a lie for the rest of my life. Or if I *am* to live a lie of sorts, at least I must know what the actual truth is.”

They walked in silence towards the dense trellis-work covered in camellias. Georgina held tightly to his muscular arm, and the moment they stopped to admire the camellias, she leaned her head on his shoulder.

“I suppose everybody thinks that your attention is simply a means of courting me,” Georgina said and hoped that her cheeks were not

blushing again.

“Yes, I suppose that is the natural assumption,” he said and turned to face her. “And I suppose it works very well in our favour, for it is an explanation of sorts that allows us to spend valuable time together.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Georgina said quietly and experienced the same dull sensation she had felt when he had asked her to dance with him so that he might be spared dancing with the young ladies.

“But I cannot help wishing that …” he began and then halted abruptly.

“Wish that what?” Georgina said, keen not to let him slip away.

She was certain that he was on the verge of telling her something, and she did not want to let it go. Whatever it was, she wanted to hear it, and she wanted to hear it now.

“Oh, nothing. Really, it is of little matter.” He tried to speak dismissively, but Georgina could see clean through it.

“I cannot help thinking that it is *not* of little matter, Sammy. Whatever it is, I wish you would say it.”

“I do not think it is something I can yet put into words.”

“But please try,” she said and looked up at him.

They were standing just inches apart, and he was so tall and broad that Georgina wanted to walk into his arms and have him hold her tightly.

He was wearing a lightweight brown tailcoat, and the colour suited him very well as always. His thick, unruly hair lifted a little here and there on the light summer breeze, and she wanted so much to reach out to touch it. Georgina did not want any idea of romance between them to merely be a piece of theatre, something to keep her father’s family occupied and diverted away from their original intention. She wanted it to be real, to be theirs.

Georgina could not understand why it was so difficult to find the words to simply tell him as much. After all, he was her oldest friend, and there was not a person on earth with whom she felt so at ease as she did with him.

She studied his face intently and could see that he was struggling with something. Perhaps he was simply trying to find the words to tell her that he knew he would hold little interest for her if he were still the servant he had been back then. Perhaps he was trying to find a way to tell her that he could not forgive her for the idea and could therefore never love her.

However, Emerson did not speak. Instead, he took hold of her upper arms quite suddenly and stared into her eyes intently. She had not realized how big his hands were before that moment and stood as still as a statue as she waited for him to say or do something that would take them from one moment to the next.

Still holding onto her upper arms, Emerson took his final step towards her, and there they stood, face-to-face, their bodies almost touching. And then, as suddenly as he had taken hold of her in the first place, he kissed her.

His lips felt warm and smooth and wonderfully unexpected. For a moment, Georgina could not move, could not respond. She merely stood there with her eyes closed and her entire awareness focused on her own lips as if her very soul lived there.

The moment she had come to her senses and decided to return his passionate kiss instead of simply standing there, he suddenly released her. He released her entirely, letting go of her arms and stepping back from her with a look of such regret on his face that Georgina could have cried.

“Georgina, forgive me,” he said hastily. “Please, forgive me … I should not have done that.”

“But Sammy, really, it is not …”

“I am afraid that I was overcome by foolishness, and I promise you that there will be no repeat of it. Can you forgive me, Georgina?”

“I do not need to forgive you, Sammy.”

“But I should like you to know that I am sorry, nonetheless,” he said and turned back towards the house.

“You need not think about it,” she said and quickly took his arm, keen that he should suffer not a moment longer.

If only she could find the words to tell him how wonderful his kiss had been, how very welcome. If only she could find the words to ask him to kiss her again.

Chapter 22

After an almost entirely sleepless night, Georgina had risen early to take some hurried breakfast before settling down in the morning room with a small pot of tea.

The night seemed to have been filled with all manner of alternative versions of events which would have seen the preceding afternoon end in a very much happier and more excited tone.

Georgina had imagined herself immediately responding to his soft, warm kiss, instead of standing as still as a statue in the afternoon sunshine. And in her imaginings, Emerson spurred on by her obvious interest, kissed her yet more passionately still.

However wonderful the little piece of theatre that her own mind had conjured up was, each time it led her back to the idea that he had thought her appalled. After all, why else would she stand stock still and make no response whatsoever? How was he to know that it was simply a case of nervousness, excitement, and awe?

Worse still, when her mind went to darker places, she imagined him truly believing that she had not wanted to kiss him because, in her own heart, she still thought of him as a servant. An orphan boy that even the Hatfield home for children could not find room for.

If only she could have found the words to tell him that she would have given anything for the kiss to go on and on forever. But she knew, of course, that a mixture of a careful upbringing and the judgement of society at large had rendered her as mute as it would have any other member of her own sex. Ladies were not expected to give voice to such feelings. In truth, she wondered if they were even expected to experience them at all.

She knew that there were women who did not entirely conform to the expectations of the day, she just wished that she were one of them. She just wished for an *ounce* of such courage.

Georgina was not due to see Emerson again until they set off in a few days' time for Cornwall. She hoped that he was not suffering in any way, not heartily regretting his actions or finding himself awake night after night as his mind produced alternative little pieces of theatre for him as hers was doing.

They had a task to perform, and it was one of the greatest importance. If there was any awkwardness between them, Georgina could not help wondering if it would in some way affect their inquiries. If they were awkward with one another, then surely Fleur and Jeremy would feel awkward also. And then if the whole party was awkward, would that not create a great awkwardness at Wighton Hall? She felt certain it would not lead to a frank exchange between herself and Beatrice, at

any rate.

And, in the end, she knew that the careful questioning of Beatrice Ellington would be her own responsibility. It had not been discussed, and yet she knew it. She was the granddaughter of Elizabeth Jeffries, the one who had, as far as the Earl of Wighton was concerned, been so determined to speak with his aunt.

The Duke himself could not possibly request an audience with the old lady; it was just not appropriate. As far as that family was concerned, the Duke's only connection to them was through Georgina herself.

As she sipped the scalding hot tea and stared out of the large windows into the uncommonly grey summer morning, Georgina felt the weight of responsibility settle around her shoulders. And it was not a sudden responsibility, but one that had been more than ten years in the making. To let Emerson down would be to let the young Sammy White down. Whatever she thought of his kiss now ought not to matter.

She would have to let it go; for the time being, she was certain of it. She could not do what must be done with such a thing hanging over her head. Instead, she would have to forget it for a while, put it to the back of the bookshelf as it were. But she would need Emerson to do the same.

And so it was that Georgina decided to write him a brief but friendly note. She would mention nothing of the kiss but be enthusiastic about her excitement for the next few days and what answers they might bring. She would add in a few practical sentences about the volume of their luggage and that sort of thing to lend it even more normality.

Hastily, she put her teacup back down on the tray and determined to write the letter immediately. Just as she was rising to her feet, the door to the morning room opened inwards, and there stood Mirabelle Allencourt.

“Good morning, Aunt Belle,” Georgina said and lowered herself onto the couch again.

“Am I interrupting, my dear?” the old lady said and gave no hint of waiting for an answer as she closed the door behind her and hastened to the couch opposite her great-niece.

“No, not at all. Would you like some tea? I can race to the breakfast room and collect another cup and saucer,” Georgina said brightly, all the while feeling that she had been entirely found out.

She had known all along that Mirabelle Allencourt was nobody’s fool and would very quickly perceive the trip to Cornwall to be anything other than an innocent acceptance of an invitation. The moment had come to tackle the thing head-on, just as she had decided she would.

“No, I have already had more tea than I can stand this morning, Georgina,” she said, raising one of her palms out in front of her to keep Georgina in her seat as she slowly lowered herself into her own. “No, no more tea.”

“I see,” Georgina said, not knowing what else to say.

“So, your little mission takes you to Cornwall, does it not?” Mirabelle Allencourt was going to get straight to the point.

“So it would seem, Aunt Belle.”

“And the *sudden Duke* is in on it all, I gather.”

“The *sudden* Duke?” Georgina said feeling curious and nervous all at once; whatever could her aunt have meant by that?

“Yes, I often refer to him in my own head as the sudden Duke. Sometimes it is the *sickly* Duke.”

“But why?”

“I think you know very well why, my dear.” Despite the fact that the elderly lady was squinting at her thoughtfully, still, there was nothing of her sister’s meanness in Mirabelle’s face.

Her face was round and lined and her eyes still kindly, even when they were at their most shrewd. Georgina did not fear her great aunt at all, she simply feared the ever-widening knowledge of her old friend's uncertain origins. As much as he had claimed he wanted now to move only forwards and never back, Georgina did not want to give another ounce of information away about him.

"I can see from your face that you do," Mirabelle went on when Georgina remained silent. "You see, I have always thought it a little strange, the long-running illness that had kept the heir apparent away from home for so many years. Not the illness itself, you understand, but the idea that nobody knew of the existence of the boy before he was returned home and proclaimed to be healthy."

"And so, you called him the sudden Duke or the sickly Duke," Georgina said quietly, her mouth dry.

"But only quietly to myself, my dear. It is not something I discuss at tea with Maud Aston," Mirabelle said and laughed brightly. "And it has to be said that I am a particularly inquisitive old lady with a lot of time on my hands. The rest of the county accepted the entire situation a decade ago and with ease. So much so, my dear, that it is all long forgotten."

"But you have not forgotten it."

“No, but that is just the sort of person I am.”

“But might there not be other ladies of advancing years with time on their hands who think as you do?”

“I have no doubt of it, but I do not think that your young man should fear them. After all, old ladies are, quite literally, a dying breed, are they not? We are none of us set to live forever, are we?”

“Aunt Belle!” Georgina said, not at all keen to discuss the demise of an aunt she had come to think so highly of.

“Oh, do not be so delicate, Georgina, it does not suit you. You do a very good imitation, but delicacy is not really your thing, not deep down.” Once again, Mirabelle narrowed those shrewd eyes. “And, of course, old ladies like me are extraordinarily loyal to Crown and Country. Things like title and estates and bloodlines are things which are bred into us as being most important. And so, you will not find me or any other inquisitive old lady causing your young man any trouble at all.”

“He is not *my* young man, Aunt Belle.”

“If he is not now, then he very soon shall be.” Mirabelle laughed and shook her head. “The poor boy.”

“So, you know that Beatrice Ellington is still alive?” Georgina said, realizing that she was to a certain degree diverting her aunt from the subject of Emerson Lockhart.

“I gathered it the moment dear Felix told me that you were all to go and stay with the Earl of Wighton in Cornwall. I am not so foggy as to think that it is Beatrice’s husband who is still the Earl, for the man would be many years older than even I am.” She laughed again, and Georgina felt comforted by it. “But I realize there could be no object in you going at all unless Beatrice herself was still alive.”

“I want to see her.”

“You want to *question* her,” Mirabelle corrected her.

“I wish I could say more.”

“You need say nothing, my dear. The very fact that your Duke is going with you and seems to be in on all of this speaks for itself.”

“Does it?” Georgina said nervously.

“Fear not, it only speaks for itself to me. It is not something that anybody else would easily discern, so you need not worry about that.”

“I see.”

“I can see that you are in a great quandary, my dear. You do not want to hide anything from me since we are now getting along so well, but you do not want to part with the confidence that Emerson Lockhart has placed in you. It is an unenviable position, Georgina, and I do not come here today to make things all the harder for you.”

“I thank you for your understanding, Aunt Belle,” Georgina said truthfully.

“And I think I realize now that the young Duke thinks very much as I do. He is not convinced by the story of his origins either, and I daresay he is seeking to fill that particular gap in his knowledge.”

“Aunt Belle, I …”

“Do not say anything. And I will not say anything more on that particular part of the conversation than I have done already. I do not expect you to confirm my suspicions; it is not necessary. There, you have given away no confidence at all, and I am still only very vaguely informed.”

“I wish I could tell you all of it, but I cannot.”

“I know, my dear,” Mirabelle began gently. “But I do not intend to ask

you to tell me anything at all. You might think that I followed you here today to speak to you in private and to persuade you to tell me all your little secrets, but that was not my intention. I did not come here to seek information, only to give it. Well, not information as such, but rather advice."

"And what advice is that?" Georgina said quietly.

"I realize that Beatrice Ellington is no longer a young woman. She is likely very frail, perhaps even frailer than I am. She might very well appear much as I do, a harmless old dear who is counting the days." Mirabelle paused for a dramatic effect that was entirely uncharacteristic of her, and Georgina, recognizing it, had to stifle a laugh. "But you must not be taken in by that. Beatrice Ellington is the sort of woman who would lie, cheat, and steal to get whatever she wanted in this world, and I daresay that age has not mellowed her. Her body might be weak, but do not trust her black heart. I cannot quite explain it, cannot put into words how it is that I know this to be true, but Beatrice Ellington is *evil*, and she always has been. And I think too much of you, my dear, to let you go into that house without that certain knowledge. Do not take anything she says for granted and never, ever turn your back on her. And whatever questions you have for that woman, you just ask them. Do not dance about the thing, and try to be polite, for Beatrice Ellington will simply see that as a weakness, and she will seize upon it. And if she does so, your journey will have been for nothing. Not only will she not give your young man

the answers he obviously needs, she will do and say things to lead him in the wrong direction altogether."

"But why?"

"Because she takes delight in such things, my dear. She always has. She looks upon other people in this world as a puppeteer looks upon his puppets. Everyone in her sphere is simply laying in stasis until she reaches out and takes their strings in her hands. And, as far as she is concerned, only *she* can make them walk or make them dance or make them jump. She truly is the darkest human being I have ever met, and you must keep that to the forefront of your mind in all your dealings with her."

"I shall, I promise," Georgina said, feeling a creeping sensation at the back of her neck that was making her most uneasy.

She knew, in truth, that she really ought not to be afraid of an elderly lady, even one as harsh as Beatrice very likely was. But the fact that Mirabelle Allencourt was not a woman given to drama, not a person to gild the lily or exaggerate at all, led Georgina to believe that it must surely all be true.

And, as frail and as old as her grandmother's closest friend might be, the idea of finally meeting the woman unnerved Georgina more than she could say.

“You just take care, my dear, and leave all thoughts of romance to one side until it is safe for you to drop your guard and think about such things.

“Romance? But …” Georgina began to protest, but her aunt was already rising to her feet.

“Surely you have realized by now that you do not fool *me*, my lovely girl,” Aunt Belle said as she made her way out of the morning room, a low rumble of laughter rolling in her ageing chest.

Chapter 23

If Georgina had never been to Calder Hall, Wighton Hall would have been the grandest place she had ever seen in her life. It was not as big as Calder Hall, but it was still so very vast.

The hall itself was a single block of three stories, with none of the additional wings that Calder Hall enjoyed. But that single block was so large, with so many windows. And it was built of the most appealing stone, almost pale peach in colour. Georgina had never seen stone that colour before, and it made Wighton Hall even more striking to look at.

Across one side of the front face of the building grew the thickest, darkest green ivy. Although it appeared to ramble beautifully, she could see that it had been neatly clipped around the large windows on all floors. She quickly assessed that a great deal of effort had gone into the appearance of natural ease.

There was a stone canopy over the entrance, held up by pillars just as at Calder Hall. However, this was a much smaller affair despite being very grand and ornate.

As they had driven down the long driveway to Wighton Hall, the hall itself had been visible throughout. The land was curiously flat for Cornwall, and the grounds of Wighton had a distinct lack of trees.

There were trees at the outer edges, of course, but there was none of the sheltered winding approach and sudden appearance of the hall over the brow of the hill as there had been at Calder.

There was something perhaps a little too neat about Wighton Hall and its grounds. The lawns were immaculate and symmetrical, and any little shrubs that grew around them were entirely equidistant.

Either the gardener was a most particular man, or the master was.

Whichever was the case, Georgina was not entirely sure she liked the effect. Her own home, and that of the Allencourt family, both displayed a certain natural quality with their winding pathways and displays of wildflowers.

Even Calder Hall had peaks and valleys and a vast woodland that stretched out for miles in all directions. There was something altogether too orderly about Wighton Hall, something which made it very much less appealing, its grandness and stunning building notwithstanding.

“This is a fine place indeed,” Emerson whispered into her ear as the carriage finally drew up at the front of Wighton Hall. “It is very tidy, though, is it not?”

Georgina was amazed that Emerson could still be impressed by such things, given that he was the master of all he surveyed at Calder, so large and fine an estate that there could not be one in all of Cornwall or Devonshire to match it. But perhaps that was simply the product of not truly believing himself to be the master in his own home.

“A little too tidy for my taste, I think,” she replied and laughed. “Although coming from a small estate like Ashdown Manor, I am not in a position to judge.”

“I think I would prefer Ashdown,” Emerson said and then straightened up as a very smart-looking middle-aged man marched towards them.

He was undoubtedly Oscar Montgomery, the Earl of Wighton, burst forth from his home and ready to meet them.

“I trust you had a good journey, Your Grace?” Lord Wighton said a little uncertainly as he looked from Emerson to Jeremy and back again.

Georgina almost laughed, immediately realizing that the poor man had no idea which of the two men he ought to be addressing first. They were both dressed very well and quite sensibly for their journey, and there was little to choose between them. They were both young, both extraordinarily handsome, and both very bright looking men.

“It was a very easy journey indeed, Lord Wighton,” Emerson said hastily to put their host out of his misery. “But I think fine weather always makes the difference, does it not?”

The Earl seemed to visibly relax as he moved to stand in front of the man he now knew was the Duke of Calder.

“What a very great honour it is to meet you, Your Grace,” he said and bowed deeply.

“And I am very pleased to meet you, my dear fellow. And please allow me to say how very kind of you to extend my friends and me such a warm invitation,” Emerson spoke genuinely and also bowed deeply. “May I introduce you to the rest of my party?”

“Certainly, Your Grace. Certainly.” The Earl of Wighton was enthusiastic in the style of a man who was undoubtedly a sycophant.

Whilst Georgina did not take an immediate dislike to him, she did not think that she would particularly warm to him either. She much preferred people to be at their ease and to be who they were on the inside instead of who they were on the outside, and she quickly judged Lord Wighton to fall into the latter category.

No doubt he would tell the tale for many years to come of how the Duke of Calder had sought him out most particularly, as keen as

mustard to spend a few days at the wonderful Wighton Hall with so fine a host.

“This is my dear friend, Miss Georgina Jeffries. I mentioned her in my letter.” Emerson smiled and nodded towards Georgina.

“I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Jeffries, and I am certain that my aunt will be pleased to meet you. I understand that your own grandmother passed, and I should like to extend my deepest condolences.” He seemed to fit an awful lot into one sentence, and Georgina was relieved when he finally put it all to an end with another deep bow.

“How very kind of you, My Lord,” she said and saw how he seemed almost to glow under the formality of her address. “And I am very pleased to finally meet you.”

“And this is Miss Fleur Allencourt, Miss Jeffries’ cousin.”

“How nice to meet you, Miss Allencourt, you are very welcome here at Wighton Hall.” He bowed again, and Georgina amused herself by imagining the stiff back he would suffer later in the day.

“And Miss Allencourt’s brother, and my dear friend, Mr Jeremy Allencourt,” Emerson said, introducing the male in the party at the very end, as was customary.

For a moment, Georgina found her mind wandering. The manners which he seemed to have taken on as second nature were things that the young Samuel White would not only have forgotten in an instant but would probably have laughed at.

How much Emerson Lockhart had had to learn about the world he now inhabited, and what a strain it must have been for a boy of eleven to have to work so hard to transform himself entirely. Georgina could not help wondering if it was tiring even now. Did he have to think about everything he did and said for fear of reverting to the servant he had once been or had he simply worked so hard at it that he did not have to try anymore?

Whichever was the case, Georgina thought his manner entirely natural.

“Mr Allencourt,” the Earl said brightly and bowed once again. “Any friend of the Duke is, of course, a friend of mine and welcome anytime.”

Georgina realized that she had bitten her tongue so many times throughout the simple introductions that it was likely going to be very sore later on. Worse still, she imagined she recognized something of that same humour in Jeremy’s eyes, and she fervently hoped that he was going to behave himself.

She knew, of course, that he was bright enough to give nothing away. Whilst he had not asked a single question of the Duke or even his own sister, it was clear to them all that Jeremy was very aware that there were things to be known.

In the end, Emerson had explained the whole thing out to him from beginning to finish. Georgina and Fleur sat in stunned silence, both of them expecting that the Duke would give as brief an explanation as possible.

Georgina had imagined that Emerson would simply say that there was some suggestion that his mother was not quite who he thought she was, entirely missing out the deepest secret of all, that he had once been a servant in Georgina's home.

But he had not missed anything out at all, giving his full and complete trust to the young man he hardly knew at all. And yet she could not see it as foolhardy, for as she watched Jeremy's face, he did not show any sign of surprise or disapproval or even the glee of gossip learned. He sat there nodding and smiling quite amiably.

He did not probe or ask any further questions; he merely thanked the Duke for his honesty and assured him of his future discretion. It was clear that Fleur was inordinately proud of her brother, and Georgina had seen her surreptitiously dab at a little emotional tear that she

thought nobody else had seen.

When Jeremy had declared himself to be at the Duke's disposal if there were anything he should need in his quest for the truth, Fleur had been forced to dab at a second tear.

From that moment on, Emerson and Jeremy had seemed to get on famously. Emerson had given his account before the carriage had even crossed the county boundary from Devonshire, very likely because he wanted to ease any little tensions before they got going.

Jeremy did not mention it again, and the two men fell to talking about this and that and seemed to be most at ease in one another's company.

Emerson seemed greatly brightened by his new allegiance, and Georgina realized that it was likely the first time he had spoken to a man of his own age without the need for constant concern that he might give himself away. Instead of perpetual vigilance, Emerson had been able to settle into conversation with his new acquaintance without fear.

It warmed Georgina to see it, and she was suddenly glad that her cousin had been invited along, even when she had thought it a mistake in the beginning.

And, as the journey continued, and the two men talked of fencing and

riding, school and university, she realized just how much had been taken from Emerson on the night he had been spirited away from Ashdown Manor. He truly had been denied the right to a real friend.

“Now then, tea is about to be served in the drawing room if that will suit you. I thought you might be in the mood for some refreshment after your long journey. In the meantime, I shall have my staff deliver your luggage to your rooms where you might care to retire for a while after we have taken tea. How does that sound?” Lord Wighton was smiling brightly, clearly relishing his role of host on that occasion.

“I think that sounds like the very thing, my dear fellow,” Emerson said and clapped a hand on the Earl’s shoulder as the two of them turned to walk side-by-side into the great hall.

The remainder of the Earl’s family was waiting in the drawing room, although Georgina instantly noted that Beatrice was certainly not there. The only woman in the room was in her middle forties and clearly the current Countess of Wighton.

And there were two young men, the Earl’s sons. The eldest was also named Oscar, and he looked to Georgina to be around five-and-twenty years. The younger of the brothers had a very dissatisfied look, almost as if he was feeling the slight of being born second and missing out on his father’s title. His name was Branton, and he looked as if he could not have cared less that a Duke of the Realm was gracing his father’s

drawing room.

In truth, Georgina could not say for certain that she blamed him. At least, at any rate, he was not in any way sycophantic. No doubt he was permanently disgruntled, and it showed, but did she not prefer a person to be who they were on the inside? She was sure that Branton Montgomery was certainly that.

Georgina was surprised to find that Emerson held up the lion's share of the conversation that afternoon, easily putting his hosts at their ease. It was a far cry from the uncertain young man she had seen greeting his guests at the garden party so many weeks before.

But she thought that it was perhaps not simply a matter that the idea of finding out his true origins had given him confidence. She could not help thinking that it was finally having people in his life with whom he could be entirely honest. And it was not just Georgina anymore, but Fleur and Jeremy.

"Is your aunt not to join us today, My Lord?" Georgina said when she had the opportunity to insert herself into the conversation.

"I am afraid that she keeps very much to her bed these days, Miss Jeffries," Lord Wighton said solemnly. "Her health is certainly not what it was."

“I am very sorry to hear that,” Georgina said truthfully, although more for her own purposes.

All she wanted was to have the truth from the old woman, if there was any to be had, and not allow the woman’s frailty and her own feelings of guilt stand in the way.

“And like many people who have lived to such a great age, Miss Jeffries, I afraid that my aunt’s mind is not quite what it was,” he said with a sudden aspect of shame, almost as if he were admitting that his aunt had leprosy. “There is a tendency for her mind to wonder, I am sad to say, and she does spend much of her time dwelling in the past. Sometimes she is so intent upon the past that it is almost as if it is happening at the moment. But I am sure you will forgive her that particular frailty, will you not?”

“There is nothing to forgive, My Lord,” Georgina said quietly. “It is a tremendous achievement to live to such a great age, and we must all make the allowances that we hope would be made for ourselves in years to come. I am still greatly looking forward to meeting her, My Lord.”

“Then you should do just that, my dear,” he said in a much heartier fashion now that he realized his guests were not shocked by the idea of a wandering mind in an elderly lady. “Perhaps tomorrow morning? My aunt is always in a much more solid frame of mind in the

mornings than she is in the evenings."

"Then I shall look forward to it, Lord Wighton."

Chapter 24

Once again, Georgina had slept fitfully. It was a mixture of causes, not least of them being that she never truly slept well in a strange place on the first night. Her room at Wighton Hall was large and very well appointed, but the ceilings were extraordinarily high and the windows so tall that it gave her the most peculiar feeling.

The room did not feel at all cozy or welcoming, for all its fine furniture and tasteful draperies.

And the moon was not at all bright that night, giving no extra glow to the darkness. At one point, she had felt so disquieted that she had almost decided to keep her oil lamp burning through until morning.

But not only did she realize that was ridiculous, she also wondered if there was truly enough oil in the lamp to last so many hours. And yet, the moment she had turned down the lamp and plunged the room into darkness, Georgina had regretted it.

She immediately began to run over Great Aunt Belle's words, almost frightening herself with them.

She had come to wish that Mirabelle Allencourt really was a fanciful and dramatic sort of woman, for at least she could safely dismiss not

only what her aunt said, but the effect it seemed to be having on her.

As she lay in the darkness, Georgina could not help wishing that the week was over, that they were already in the Duke's carriage and making their pleasant and rambling journey back to Devonshire.

In truth, if her first meeting with Beatrice Ellington the next day could at least be over, then that would be something.

Feeling extraordinarily washed out the following morning, Georgina made a fine effort at breakfast. She chattered happily and forced down much more food than she had the stomach for. She did not yet know what time she was due to meet her grandmother's old friend and knew that she would not settle until that meeting was finally done.

In the end, it was almost eleven o'clock before the Countess of Wighton escorted her to the large bedroom on the first floor that had apparently been almost home to the dowager for many years.

"Forgive me for saying so, Miss Jeffries, but you might not necessarily find my husband's aunt the most pleasant of company," Lady Wighton said when they were alone. "It is not simply age which sours her, I am afraid. I rather fear that her personality is just of that construction."

"You need not worry, My Lady, for my grandmother was very much the same. I daresay it was their dispositions which drew them together

in the first place when they were girls in Devonshire."

"You are very understanding, Miss Jeffries, and I thank you for it. But might I advise you to spend only a few minutes with her? I tend to find that a few minutes can usually be managed without receiving any sort of insult or other comment which might offend."

"Oh yes, of course."

"That is not to say that you cannot visit her again, for you may visit her every day this week if you choose."

"Then I shall follow your advice, Lady Wighton."

"I shall take you in now and introduce you, and then I shall leave you alone. Do come out whenever you are ready, and I will see to it that there is tea ready and waiting for you in the drawing room."

Georgina nodded mutely, her palms suddenly perspiring and her heart beating in a way that she could feel. She knew that she was afraid to meet Beatrice Ellington finally, even though she was sure that so elderly a lady could do her no harm. And yet there was something about the idea of meeting a woman so cold that she cared nothing for the heartbreak of her own dear brother that unsettled her greatly. If she could treat her brother in that way, how much easier had she found it over the years to be so casually cruel to others around her?

“Aunt Beatrice?” Lady Wighton called out tentatively as she slowly opened the door inward. “Aunt Beatrice, I have a visitor for you.”

“Is it her? Is it Elizabeth’s girl?” came a surprisingly hearty voice.

The voice was so hearty, in fact, that when Georgina finally laid eyes on the shrunken, wizened body in the enormous bed, she almost gasped.

The voice and the frame did in no way match, and the old lady in the bed seemed to her so much older even than Great Aunt Belle. It was almost as if she might easily turn into dust at any moment and be carried away on the slightest breath of air as if she had never existed in the first place.

Despite the fact that the woman had undoubtedly shrunken with age, as old ladies are want to do, it was clear that she had never been particularly substantial. Georgina could tell that Beatrice had been of short stature in life, with a birdlike frame and somewhat angular features.

Her eyes were so dark in a face so grey that they looked almost black, and they darted this way and that constantly as if she was searching for something that she could not see.

Perhaps it was the better chance. Was that not what she had said in her letters? *Always take the better chance, my brother will survive it I am sure*. Was she still, even now, searching for the *better chance?* Surely a woman who thought as she had done would never be satisfied.

Georgina shivered inwardly and wished that she had not thought of that dreadful letter. She needed to keep a clear head and did not want either revulsion or fear to steer her off her course.

“Yes, this is Miss Georgina Jeffries, granddaughter of the late Baroness Elizabeth Jeffries,” the Countess said, making an unnecessarily formal introduction in Georgina’s opinion. “Anyway, I shall leave the two of you for a while, for I am sure that you have much to talk about.” Lady Wighton smiled demurely and seemed to Georgina to almost back out of the room.

“Come closer, girl,” the hearty voice demanded, and Georgina had to force herself to put one foot in front of the other and advance upon the enormous bed. “Let me have a look at you.”

And look at her she did! The elderly lady seemed to lift her head just an inch or so from her pillow as she squinted those dark eyes and held them steady for several moments as she surveyed Georgina’s face without blinking once.

She wondered if it was nothing more than her imagination running

away with itself, but the steady stare unsettled her greatly, even made her a little afraid.

“I can see a look of my Lizzie now, that is true,” she said and let her head fall heavily back onto her pillows.

She breathed hard for a few moments as if the exertion had taken the very last ounce of energy she had left in that wasted old body. She remained silent for more than a minute leaving Georgina simply standing there wondering if she ought to speak or not.

“You are not quite the beauty that she was, though.” When Beatrice spoke again, it startled Georgina. “You are *passably pretty*, but no real beauty.”

Georgina kept as straight a countenance as she could manage. She was by no means offended, just amused that Lady Wighton’s words had come to pass. However, she had not imagined being insulted quite so early on in the conversation.

“Quite so, Lady Wighton.” Georgina kept her tone light and her address as formal as could be. “I must say that I am very pleased to finally meet you. My grandmother often spoke of you.”

“No, she did not,” the old lady said waspishly, and Georgina felt herself flush at being caught out in a lie.

How on earth could Beatrice have known that Elizabeth Jeffries never spoke of her at all? Certainly, Georgina had never heard of her until she had come to Winton House in the spring. But it was clear from her own mother's letter that *she* knew of her, for she had claimed that Beatrice Ellington was the only person Elizabeth spoke fondly of when she talked of her life in Devonshire.

"Elizabeth Allencourt was not a girl who wasted her time in chitchat, child," Beatrice said, and her use of her grandmother's maiden name made Georgina shiver again. It made her think of the two foul-natured young women who had once been friends growing up in the little town of Rowley. "She knew better than that. How old were you when she died?"

"I was ten."

"I hardly imagine that she spoke to you at all, about me or anybody else. Elizabeth did not like children."

"I can quite believe that," Georgina said with sudden harshness.

She remembered how Mirabelle had told her not to show any weakness. She had forgotten it until that moment, but it was clear that that shrewd and unsettling creature in the bed could find and exploit a weakness in anybody.

“That is more like it,” the old woman said, and her laugh sounded more like the cackle of a witch. “You have a little something of Elizabeth’s spirit in you, I perceive.”

“Perhaps I do,” Georgina said and felt already that she was flailing. “But I am not entirely sure that *that* is a good thing.”

“Do not go through this world in such a bending state, my dear. It will not serve you well. You need to remain alert to the intentions of others and to make your intentions match them or surpass them. My advice would be *surpass*, but each their own.” She paused and lifted her head again to study Georgina with the same thoroughness she had used initially. However, Georgina did not find it quite so unsettling; this time she felt a little stab of pride that she was finally finding her feet in this already dreadful conversation. “Always keep a lookout for the better chance, my dear. That is what I always told Lizzie, and it served her well. It served us both well.”

“Yes, I believe that looking for the *better chance* was exactly how my grandmother found my grandfather.”

“Advice well given and well received.” The old woman seemed to glow a little, basking in what she obviously thought of as praise where Georgina had merely meant it as a vague sort of insult.

“No matter the cost?” Georgina was not going to dance around the thing.

Mirabelle Allencourt’s advice was also well given and well received.

“What cost? There was no cost to Elizabeth.”

“But perhaps there was a cost to my grandfather. I believe they were very different in natures.”

“Oh, that is just marriage. For heaven’s sake, you are not one of those silly things who moons about this world thinking it is all about love, are you?”

“And what about the cost to David?” Georgina had no intention of answering Beatrice’s question and had found her comment flying from her mouth unedited as a means of hurting the woman instead.

“David,” Beatrice said, quite simply; it was a statement, not a question.

Georgina saw something in the old woman’s eyes and wondered if it was regret. But surely a woman who had lived without a care for others would not relent now.

“He was in love with my grandmother, was he not?”

“He was. What a fool,” she said, and her voice seemed to be weakening.

For a moment, Georgina’s guilt almost trapped her as she wondered if her harsh line of questioning had been responsible for the sudden lack of energy in her opponent. It was as if somebody had pierced Beatrice and let the life and soul right out of her.

“And my grandmother loved him?”

“For a little while. But Lizzie was no fool, and I soon tutored her in the ways of the world. And the world does not turn on such flighty notions.”

“And so, what *does* it turn on, Lady Wighton?”

“It just turns. It turns and turns and turns,” she said, and her voice seemed suddenly thin and reedy, a pale imitation of the former hearty tone.

“Lady Wighton? Are you quite well?”

“I am not sure. I do not think I am Lady Wighton. Not yet, at any rate. Not until I catch him in my net and marry him.”

“Catch him in your net? But who are you to marry?” Georgina said and felt suddenly confused.

“That lovely young Earl. Of course, he is not so young, not really. Old enough to be my father.” Beatrice was now whispering, and her eyes had closed.

“What is your name?” Georgina said gently.

“Why are you here if you do not know my name, you silly girl?”

“I would just like you to remind me.”

“I am Beatrice Ellington.”

“You are not Beatrice Montgomery then? You are not Lady Wighton?”

“I have already told you, not yet. I have seen the better chance, even if I do not like him very much. But what has that to do with it? Lizzie thinks it is a good idea, and Lizzie and I are always in perfect symmetry. That is why Lizzie and I have always been the best of friends, and we always shall. I do not know who you are. I do not know why you are here. I do not think I like you very much.”

“In that case, I shall leave you until tomorrow, Miss Ellington,” Georgina said with a heavy heart when she realized that Beatrice was

drifting in her mind, just as Lord Wighton had said she would.

She knew she would get nothing further from her that day, but at least she had met her now. At least she had a better idea of how to approach the woman, and when she met with her again, she would not waste any time.

“Yes, come back again sometime. How nice it has been to see you,” Beatrice said, and with her eyes still closed, she peeled back her lips and smiled garishly at Georgina.

Chapter 25

“How are you baring up in all of this, Sammy? I seem to be making little progress,” Georgina said and wandered further across the terrace beyond the morning room at Wighton Hall.

It was another fine summer’s day and already very warm. Georgina sat down on an ornate cast iron bench and was surprised when Emerson joined her. He sat at her side, foregoing the two matching seats opposite the bench.

There seemed to be a little freedom in their being in Cornwall. They were away from all they knew, and Georgina had none of the social fears she might have suffered had she been sitting on a bench with Emerson back at Winton House or even Calder Hall.

“I know that you have taken all the responsibility of this trip and these interviews with Beatrice entirely upon your own shoulders. But you must not do that. You must not feel as if the whole thing rests upon you.” He lifted his hand from his lap for a moment, and it seemed to hover uncertainly in mid-air.

Georgina held her breath for a moment, thinking that Emerson was about to lay a hand on her arm, or even take her hand in his. And it was not until then that she realized how much she longed for such a

touch, such a simple thing.

She had remained vigilant to her thoughts of Emerson for many days, determined to put the search for the truth at the forefront of her mind. But there were times when the memory of their kiss inevitably came back to her, and as they sat side-by-side, as close as it was possible to be without touching, it came back to her again.

As suddenly as Emerson had raised his hand, he allowed it to drop down onto his lap once more. It was as if he had struggled briefly and then come to a conclusion, and Georgina could not help wishing that things were much simpler between them. Why should romance be so very difficult when their friendship was anything but?

“I know, and I thank you for your care,” Georgina said, bringing herself back to the present moment. “I just wish that things had progressed as we had hoped.”

“None of us could have foreseen the little illness that has waylaid Beatrice these last three days,” Emerson said encouragingly.

“Perhaps we *could* have foreseen it. Or perhaps I *ought* to have foreseen it after our first meeting.”

“What do you mean?”

“May God forgive me if I am wrong, but I do not believe for a moment that there is anything at all wrong with Beatrice Montgomery.”

“But you said yourself that her mind wandered.”

“No, that is not what I mean, Sammy. This extra little illness, this malady which has made it impossible for her to see me these last three days is something that I cannot quite trust. If only you had met with her too, although I would not wish it on you.” She paused for a moment and shuddered at the memory. “But if you had met her, you would have seen those eyes. You would have realized how perfectly plausible it is for an elderly lady, even one whose mind wanders from time to time, can contrive to make herself awkward and cause pain even now.”

“You think that she is toying with you? That she is making you wait for another interview?”

“I know that Aunt Belle’s words unsettled me, but there is something about Beatrice. There is something in those eyes that tells me she would stick at nothing, even to achieve very little more than her own way. And yes, I think she is toying with me. But I must admit that I think with a woman like that I should perhaps just be pleased that *that* is all she is doing. I truly believe that there is a very appalling black heart beating in that frail old chest, the sort of black heart that could do almost anything to anybody and not suffer a moment’s conscience.”

“I am quite prepared to believe it, and I have only seen her letters.” Emerson laughed. “But listen, you must not feel as if you are obliged to go and sit with her today. I know this is the first opportunity that has arisen in three days, but you need never set eyes on that woman again if she unsettles you so.” He spoke so genuinely that she knew he meant it.

Georgina knew without a doubt that he would have turned his back on his own quest there and then to spare her any discomfort. If he was never truly able to settle upon her in a romantic sense, Georgina realized that this was the sort of friendship that, once found, should never be relinquished.

“I would not dream of it, Sammy. I think I am as keen to get to the bottom of things as you are.” She reached out a hand by instinct to smooth down his silvery brown hair.

Without even the hint of a summer’s breeze, still, that wonderful hair had managed somehow to disarrange itself. Georgina lost herself for a moment, hardly believing that she had done such a thing. And yet her hand remained as she savoured the feel of the smooth, thick hair against her fingers. Finally, knowing that she must, she withdrew her hand without any mention of it.

“Well, I shall seek out the Countess and ask her if I might have an

audience with Beatrice this morning." Georgina rose to her feet. "Wish me luck."

When the Countess confirmed that Beatrice was, indeed, well enough to be visited, Georgina felt a familiar nervousness creeping up on her again.

She was pleased to have another opportunity to search for the truth but wished wholeheartedly that the thing was over and done with. She did not relish another moment in that dreadful woman's company, and yet she knew she must bear it somehow.

Just as the Countess had done the first time, she entered the room first and quickly introduced Georgina.

"You need not explain who she is all over again, my dear. I might be ageing, but I have yet to lose my senses." Beatrice's voice was hearty in tone once again, and Georgina wondered if the old woman had any idea that her mind wandered from time to time.

Perhaps she did not know anything about it. Perhaps that was simply the way of things as a person got older. If it was, Georgina thought it a blessing and mercy.

"Good morning, Lady Montgomery," Georgina said in a bright tone.

She was keen not to make any of the mistakes she had made in their first meeting and had fully decided to show no adverse emotion or any sign of weakness. She knew that if she did, the wizened little jackal in the bed would seize upon it immediately.

“Come closer then; do not make me crane my neck to see you,” Beatrice demanded, and Georgina walked boldly forward.

She noticed how the Countess backed out of the room again, seeming almost to slither out of harm’s way before gently closing the door behind her.

“Well, you have returned, have you?”

“Yes, and I do hope that you are feeling a little better, My Lady,” Georgina said without any hint of true feeling.

“I daresay it has pained you waiting these three days to see me again.” Beatrice narrowed her hawk-like eyes as the corners of her mouth turned up in amusement.

So, Georgina had been right; the old woman really had simply been toying with her, playing with her mind from afar. What a creature she was.

“Not at all, My Lady. I fully understand that you were not well enough

to speak with me."

"Is that so?" Beatrice, seeming annoyed by the idea that her little game had not affected her opponent turned her head away and stared out of the window.

Georgina resisted the temptation to feel pity for her again, almost giving into the idea that it must be an awful thing for a once-strong woman to have nothing left at her disposal than to play silly little games of the mind from the confines of her bed. How frail it must have made her feel and how much she must have seen her influence in the world diminishing.

Still, of all people, Georgina felt sure that Beatrice did not deserve her pity.

"But here we are together again, Lady Wighton. Would you not prefer to spend these few minutes together in conversation?"

"It is not conversation, my dear, it is questioning." Beatrice's head turned so slowly to regard her once again that she reminded Georgina of an old tortoise, her old head and craped neck peeping out from the bedclothes just as a tortoise's might from its shell.

"Perhaps you would prefer me not to ask any questions, My Lady." Georgina was beginning to lose patience before she had even begun. If

the old woman were going to play games with her, then Georgina would play a few of her own. “Perhaps you would rather I left you in peace again.”

Georgina knew it was a risk, given that the old woman was very likely a shrewd judge of character. Nobody who manipulated the world as she had could be anything but. However, it was a risk that Georgina was prepared to take. She decided there and then that if it came to nothing, if the old woman simply agreed and dismissed her from her presence, she would instead turn her attention to the Earl himself and question *him* until she discovered everything she could about that family.

When the old woman had not spoken for some moments, Georgina inclined her head graciously and then turned to head back to the door.

“Where are you going?” Beatrice barked. “Come back over here.”

“Tell me, My Lady, did you always maintain contact with my grandmother?”

“It is true that we were not often in each other’s company anymore after we married. How could we be? I was in Cornwall with my new husband as Lizzie was in Hertfordshire with hers.”

“Did you write?”

“Of course we did, we did not abandon one another altogether.”

“Because your friendship was so important.”

“Yes. Neither one of us had a true friend again to speak of. Acquaintances, yes, but all so plain and vapid. All conforming to society and doing just as they ought.”

“Is that not what you yourself did?”

“It is quite possible to *appear* to conform without actually conforming. My dear, what a dull life you must lead with your saintly little morals.”

“I would not describe myself as a saint, My Lady,” Georgina said, although she knew that she must hurriedly change the subject. She did not want to open up her character for assassination, for she felt sure that Beatrice would waste the rest of the interview trying to upend and insult her. “You must have missed Elizabeth.”

“I did. And she missed me.” Georgina could have sighed in relief that the old woman had been returned to the original path so quickly. “But we were there for each other when truly needed, believe me.”

“Really?” Georgina raised her eyebrows hoping for something further.

“Children get in the way, of course.” Beatrice wafted a frail hand back-and-forth as if to swat away a cluster of invisible children.

“Hard work, I daresay.” Georgina nodded. “But then you each only had one child, did you not?”

“Quite so. I was not as fortunate as Lizzie in that I could not produce an heir to this estate as she was able to do at Ashdown.”

“But the current Earl is very attentive, is he not?”

“Oscar is a milk sop. He is weak, limp. He is his uncle’s nephew.”

“You did not think highly of your husband then?”

“One does not have to think highly of one’s husband. Dear, dear, there is that silly romantic streak again. You would do well to banish that from your soul.” Beatrice stared at her with open disdain.

“But if a person banishes such a thing, do they have any soul left?”

“Oh dear, you think me soulless.” Beatrice began to cackle. “Just like Esme did.”

“Esme?” Georgina asked and, when Beatrice did not respond, she went

on. “Was Esme your daughter?”

“Yes. Another one with foolish romantic notions. They say that the apple does not fall very far from the tree, and it is true, it does not. Unfortunately for my daughter, she was the apple who was the product of my husband’s tree, not mine. She was like him, weak and tortured. She believed in love, the silly girl.”

“And your husband had believed in the same?”

“Yes, and I was very glad of it in the beginning.”

“Because you loved him too?” Georgina said and realized that she sounded hopeful.

“No, I did not love him.” Beatrice almost spat the words, her lined face contorting into something quite repugnant. “But it made it very much easier for me in securing my own position.”

Georgina shuddered as she was once again brought up hard against the fact that Beatrice did not have a feeling bone in her body.

“You look shocked, my dear. And yet you should not, for loveless transactions take place all the time, even in the wonderful society that *you* inhabit. Surely you do not think that people always marry for love?” She cackled, and the callousness of it angered Georgina.

“But yours was not an entirely loveless transaction, surely.”

“You feel pity towards my husband that he loved me only to discover that I did not love him. He would have liked that, my dear.” She laughed again, although it was less of a cackle this time. “He would have appreciated your concern, I am sure.”

“That is truly very cold.” Georgina wanted to turn on her heel and leave the room never to return.

“He was a very good choice in many respects, although his propensity towards softness was perhaps something that I should have eradicated in him.”

“How can you possibly eradicate a kind nature?”

“Believe me, it is possible.” The old woman closed her eyes, and Georgina feared that the interview would soon be coming to an end again.

“But why should you have eradicated it? Once you had him in your grasp, once you had married him, surely it did not matter,” Georgina spoke hurriedly, not wanting to waste a moment.

“Because it passed on to my daughter. She was weak, the silly

romantic creature. Worse even than you, I suspect. It was almost as if her heart ran her entirely, and there was no room for sense or logic anywhere."

"Could you not have appreciated a tender heart in your own child?"

"I pitied her at first." The old eyes flew open again. "But when I could not change her, I pitied her less. I would have turned her loose, but Lizzie knew what to do."

"Turned her loose? You would have denied your own daughter?"

"Lizzie always knows what to do. Thank God she no longer has a tender heart, or she would be as stupid and useless as everybody else. She would be as pathetic as my brother. As pathetic as my daughter. As pathetic as my husband."

"And what did Lizzie do?"

"They are all so pathetic that I cannot stand them. I wish they would just disappear."

"Your husband? Your daughter? But they are gone."

"I must write to Lizzie. She is so clever."

As Beatrice's eyes closed, and her voice trailed away to nothing, Georgina realized that her second conversation with the most unsettling person she had ever met in her life had come to an end.

Without another word, Georgina turned and walked towards the door.

Chapter 26

With his driver acting as valet, Emerson was ready for the Earl's social evening in no time. He was so early, in fact, that he dismissed his driver and simply sat in his chamber and waited for the evening's engagement to begin.

The Earl had invited several of the local families to spend the evening in the Duke's company. Emerson knew that he was being shown off essentially but realized that *that* was all part and parcel of his visit to Wighton Hall. It was his part of the trade.

The whole thing had been a bargain, and this was simply his part of it. As much as he had not particularly warmed to Oscar Montgomery, Emerson had decided to play his part well that evening. He owed the man, he knew that much. Although it was true to say that the Earl had no idea that he had offered any assistance at all.

And, in the end, Emerson could not help wondering the real value of that assistance, given that Beatrice Ellington was clearly still the girl she had always been, the girl who had written such awful letters containing unashamed excerpts from her cold heart.

That the old woman was amusing herself at Georgina's expense was clear, and so far they did not seem to have come out of it with much

at all. He felt worse for Georgina, of course, for she had borne the brunt of it all.

It was true that he had got them there, but Georgina had certainly had a harder task. She had twice been in to see the old woman, and each interview had lasted but a few minutes. However, the effect on her was clear each time, and in his heart, he did not want to subject Georgie to another moment in that woman's company.

And yet Georgie was so determined that she would have just one more audience with her if she could secure such a thing. How hard she had fought in her quest to help him.

In the end, Emerson sat in his chamber for more than an hour before the time came for the family and guests to reconvene in the great drawing room.

He had spent much of that time in thoughts of Georgie, closing his eyes and remembering the feel of her soft lips on his own in the grounds of Winton House. It was magical to him that she had not pulled away but very clear that she had not participated either. She had simply been frozen on the spot, and he could not tell if it was nerves or if she did not have even a shade of the feeling for him that he had for her.

Emerson's life being what it had been, so insecure and based on so

much that was not true, he did not want it to continue in that vein. He did not want to lie to himself as he had always been lied to, and so he chose to believe that Georgie simply did not want him as anything other than a friend. And there was a certain amount of comfort in that brutal honesty, even if it brought pain with it.

When he descended the winding staircase and strode into the drawing room, he could see that the Earl's servants had truly been put to work that day. The furniture had been moved around all over the place, giving a little room around the piano for dancing, at least that was his assumption.

There was a table of light refreshments for the guests, and Emerson, feeling suddenly very hungry, wished that he could tuck into them immediately.

"I do believe I recognize that look," Georgie said, appearing suddenly at his side. "Should we wait until nobody is looking and steal something away as if we were back at Ashdown and Mrs Townley had turned her back?"

"Would you even dare?" He turned to look into her eyes and saw how they sparkled with his challenge, just as they always had when they were children.

"Of course," Georgina said so matter-of-factly that he laughed. "You

might laugh, but I am going to do it." She seemed suddenly determined, and he hastily looked all around the room to see who was there.

Oscar Montgomery was just a few feet away with the Countess at his side as they greeted two couples who had arrived at the same time.

Emerson watched as they each tried to hold their interest upon the Earl, all the while desperate to look around the room for any sign of this Duke they had been promised. It was with great amusement that Emerson realized that their eyes continually flickered over to where Jeremy Allencourt and his sister Fleur were in conversation with one another and enjoying a glass of the Earl's very fine sherry.

"They think that Jeremy is the Duke," Georgina said in a whisper and laughed gently. "Do you mind very much?"

"Not at all; I like Jeremy very much. And I think he rather looks like a Duke, do you not? He is fair and handsome enough."

"He most certainly is," Georgina said in a teasing tone. "Perhaps a little too fair for my taste, though," she added and looked at his own mop of unruly ash brown hair significantly.

There was something in her tone which excited him; perhaps it was the challenge he had laid down and the return to their old childhood

excesses that had lightened her mood and made her just a little mischievous. And yet the result of it reminded him that they were no longer children; they were adults. A man and a woman; could she be as drawn to him as he was to her?

“Wait, what are you doing?” he said and watched in disbelief as she prettily chewed at something that was in her mouth.

“Chewing,” she said through barely parted lips. “And now swallowing.” She smiled broadly.

“You took something?”

“Was that not the challenge?”

“Yes, but I did not see you do it.”

“That is the whole point with stealing, Sammy. One is not supposed to be caught doing it.”

“How do I know that you really did eat something? How am I to know that you are not acting the whole thing out?”

“Some things never change, do they? Really, you might still be nine years old at this moment.”

“I am not the one who just stole something from the table.” He smiled at her, thoroughly enjoying the banter.

“Ah, so now you believe that I did?”

“I suppose I will just have to take your word for it in the absence of any proof.”

“Here you go. Here is proof.” She opened her immaculately white-gloved hand to reveal tiny savoury pastry. “I took one for you too.” She peered over his shoulder, and he realized that she was acting as his lookout, just as she had done so many times in the past, and he was reminded how she had often peered around the edge of the kitchen door for any sign that Mrs Townley was returning.

With a mischievous grin, Emerson took the pastry and hurriedly popped it into his mouth. It tasted wonderful, all the more so for having been part of such a moment of closeness.

Emerson had always loved Georgina, even when they had been parted so long, but now he knew for certain that he was *in love* with her; he loved her as a man loves a woman, not as a boy loves his friend.

And she looked so very beautiful dressed in an ivory gown with an intricate lace overlay in faded green. Her peachy cream skin was radiant, and her blue eyes twinkled with a wonderful, youthful

merriment.

Yes, Emerson Lockhart was very definitely in love with Georgina Jeffries.

He wanted the rest of the room to stay away, to keep to what they were doing and to never advance upon the pair throughout the remainder of the evening. Emerson simply wanted to stand there with Georgina all night, to hold onto the carefree mood that seemed to have them both in its grip.

“Your Grace.” As the Earl of Wighton approached, Emerson detected a bold familiarity in his tone that had not previously been in existence.

No doubt it was for the benefit of his guests, to give them all the impression that the two men were much better acquainted than they truly were. Emerson felt his hackles rise a little, though not through any snobbery.

He did not think himself above the Earl of Wighton, anything but. He simply despised the way of things, the easy acceptance that one man was better than another based on nothing more than a title he had been handed. And in the end, was that not what titles were? Were they ever truly a right, or was it a simple folly, nothing more substantial than a common man naming his first son after himself? Why did any of it matter?

However, Emerson remembered his determination to repay the favour that the Earl had not been aware of bestowing and smiled broadly as his host and a selection of guests advanced upon him and Georgina.

“Might I introduce Baron and Baroness Archer?” the Earl said brightly as the first two of his guests put themselves forward.

“Lord Archer,” Emerson said grandly and bowed. “Lady Archer, what a pleasure,” he cooed and bowed deeper still.

“How nice to meet you, Your Grace,” Lady Archer said in a purr as she surveyed him appreciatively.

It was not the first time that Emerson had been so closely appraised by an older woman, but he had to admit that its effects did not lessen with time and familiarity, and it was as uncomfortable then as it had been the first time it had happened.

“And this is Mr Charles Wesley, and his wife, Esmeralda. They are a great part of this area of Cornwall and own a very fine estate just five miles from here,” the Earl went on, and Emerson found himself greatly amused by so thorough an introduction.

He momentarily caught Georgina’s eye and could see that she was equally amused by it, her blue eyes dancing and the corners of her

mouth turned up in a way which led him to think that she might laugh at any moment.

“Mr and Mrs Wesley, what a pleasure.” He bowed at one and then the other.

“And this is our daughter, Your Grace,” Mrs Wesley said with a determined look he recognized of old. “This is Miss Ariadne Wesley.” She introduced her daughter with a flourish.

“How charming to meet you, Miss Wesley.” Emerson bowed but was careful not to maintain eye contact with the pretty young lady.

As much as he was keen to be the perfect house-guest, he did not want to find himself cornered by Ariadne Wesley and her hopeful parents the rest of the evening.

As his eyes scanned the room, he realized that more guests were arriving. And he realized with an inward groan that almost all of them had arrived with a very carefully turned out daughter or two in tow.

“And please allow me to introduce you all to my friend and companion, the Honourable Miss Georgina Jeffries,” he said and saw her eyes widen at his use of her own small title.

He had quickly realized that the Earl was going to treat Georgina as

an afterthought, something of an inconvenience when there were so many hopeful parents in the room. And as far as Emerson was concerned, Georgina was anything but an afterthought. She was his first thought; his only thought.

The evening dragged on in what seemed to be an endless succession of just such introductions. The Earl was growing ever more pleased with himself with each minute that passed, with each introduction that was made, and his tone became ever more familiar as if the two of them were the oldest of friends.

Continuing her mischief, Georgina eyed him with amusement before absenting herself from the little party so that she might join Fleur and Jeremy for a while. Emerson looked at her often, wishing that it could be just the two of them again. And every time he looked at her, he noted that Georgina was looking at him.

Resigning himself to an evening where it would be necessary to conduct the same mundane conversation over and over again with every little party he was subjected to, he let his thoughts stray and remembered how Georgina's hand had felt in his hair.

He knew that she had straightened it by instinct, almost like a sister might have done. But had her hand lingered just a little longer than was necessary? Or was that simply wishful thinking on his part?

When the musicians that the Earl had hired for the evening began to play, Emerson felt the familiar sensation of so many eyes upon him. With a practiced air of not having noticed any of them, he smiled broadly and strode across the room to where Georgina stood.

“Would you do me the honour, Miss Jeffries?” he said and raised his eyebrows as he held his hand out to her.

“Of course, Your Grace.”

As they made their way to the space which had been specifically cleared for dancing, he leaned over to whisper in her ear.

“Truly I do want to dance with you.”

“I know,” she whispered back and looked into his eyes.

At that moment, he thought he had never been more certain. Surely she looked back at him with the same excitement, the same notions of a wonderful romance?

“Good.” He smiled at her.

“I am passed that jealousy now.”

“Jealousy?”

“Yes, I should have admitted myself envious of all the young ladies you attracted before, instead of treating you so coolly.”

“But you are not envious now?” he said, and his spirits began to plummet, thinking she must surely have no interest in him whatsoever after all.

“No, but only because I know you better. I know you are not so easily flattered.”

“But you have not lost your interest? I mean … I did not mean to suggest an interest in the first place … I … Forgive me, Georgie,” he said and realized he was stuttering badly. “Forgive me, I have turned you away. I ought not to have kissed you that day; I should not have been so forceful.”

To his almost eternal agony, he had to wait for her response until the end of the dance. They had been joined by several other couples, and it was not possible to continue the conversation.

“You have done nothing to turn me away,” she whispered into his ear the moment the dancing was over and he was escorting her back to Fleur. “And I do not regret that you kissed me, so you ought not to regret it either.”

“I did not offend you?”

“No, you could never offend me.” She paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and he realized that she had something important to say. “I want you to know that my feelings for you are constant. They will not wax nor wane, and they are not dependent upon the outcome of our inquiries. If we never discover who you are, or if we discover that you are truly the Duke, or even if we discover that you are not a part of the Lockhart family at all, my feelings for you shall be the same. I am not waiting for something, Sammy. I really am not waiting, although I cannot help thinking that you are.”

“I want to be the man you deserve.”

“You already are,” she said and blinked hard as her beautiful blue eyes shone with emotion.

“I must find out who I am, Georgie. I have to know if I am a Duke or a servant.”

“I understand,” she said, and he was sure that her shoulders sagged just a little.

As wonderful as it had been to hear that it did not matter to her, still it mattered to him. He wanted to be sure that his circumstances were absolutely secure before offering her anything more than his

friendship.

Chapter 27

It was the last full day of their stay in Cornwall, and Georgina was determined to make the most of her final interview with Beatrice. She would not falter or flounder for a moment, for finding out Emerson Lockhart's true origins had become even more important than before.

Georgina had understood him entirely on the first of two evenings of painfully amusing social events at which the Earl of Wighton had shown off his new acquaintance shamelessly. She had understood without a shadow of a doubt that Emerson was determined that he would not make her an offer of any kind unless he were certain that he was the son of the Duke of Calder.

Georgina, who had been convinced of that very thing from the first, could entirely understand Emerson's lack of conviction. After all, Emerson was the one who had been lied to for so many years, the boy who had been dragged from pillar to post, from one life to another, without a proper explanation or even so much as a fleeting apology.

But Georgina knew that her own affirmative conviction was not going to be good enough. Emerson needed to know it for himself, even though she had finally opened up her heart and told him without ambiguity that she wanted him whether he truly was a Duke of the Realm or if he was simply a common man, a servant who had been

elevated by the curious quirks of fate.

And yet it had made no difference. He was so determined about it all that Georgina began to fear that they might never progress beyond that point. They might only ever be the friends that they always had been if she could not prove to him conclusively that he was the rightful Duke of Calder.

It was the only way that he would see himself as good enough for her and, as much of that idea almost broke her heart in two, Georgina knew that she could not fight it.

Emerson Lockhart, the man, was as stubborn and determined as Sammy White, the boy had been. And she would find out who he was now at any cost. She did not want to lose him merely because she was afraid of an evil old lady, or even the smallest bit respectful of her long departed grandmother.

If she had to turn Beatrice Montgomery upside down out of her bed and shake her by the ankles to get the truth out of her, then that was what she intended to do. She would not be unnerved and belittled and laughed at by that spiteful old crow a moment longer.

She would take charge this time, and if Beatrice Montgomery had something to say about it, she would rue the day.

“You are here again, Miss Jeffries. I had thought that you would have returned to Hertfordshire by now,” Beatrice said with a smirk when the two were face-to-face and alone once more.

“No, you did not, Lady Wighton,” Georgina said as she confidently stood her ground. “You know fine well that I am not due to leave until tomorrow, and this is nothing more than another one of your little games.”

“Well, goodness me, you have come in here this morning with a very different air altogether.” The old lady eyed her with interest. “I wonder what has affected this transformation.”

“I have grown tired of your diversions, My Lady. You lay in this bed and do nothing more than amuse yourself by terrorizing your nephew’s wife, and now you are hoping to upend me with your unpredictable behaviour and very firm insults.”

“Well, well, well.” Beatrice did not look offended, rather she looked pleased by the idea that Georgina Jeffries had suddenly become a worthy opponent instead of a pretty little ladybird whose wings she was about to pull off with her bare hands. “Perhaps you are not so weak and pathetic after all. Perhaps you really do have a little something of my dear Lizzie about you.”

“If you think I find that a compliment, think again.”

“Did you not get along with your grandmother?” Beatrice laughed so deeply that it seemed almost impossible that the sound could be coming from such a frail old chest, a woman of skin and bones.

“No, I did not. She was a loveless, hard-faced old woman who did not show a moment’s compassion to anybody. Not to her son, not to her husband, not to her granddaughter, not even to a tiny baby.”

“A tiny baby? And what *tiny baby* would this be?” Georgina knew that the old woman understood her perfectly.

She fixed her with such a stare, and her mouth twisted into that vile, garish smile once again. At that moment, Georgina realized that Beatrice had known all along. Before she had even arrived in Cornwall, Beatrice had known Georgina’s reason for coming. It had not been to spend some time with a dear friend of her beloved grandmother, but to find out exactly where it was that Samuel White had come from all those years ago.

Beatrice had been waiting for this moment, even looking forward to it so twisted was she, and it was all so clear now that Georgina felt like a fool.

She had been tiptoeing around an old woman who had known all along her exact purpose. Beatrice had known the questions she had

truly wanted to ask and had seen her trying every method to politely get them instead of simply coming straight out with the thing.

“I am told that the Duke of Calder is here visiting with you, my dear,” Beatrice said when Georgina had been silent for some moments. “My dear nephew is in quite a spin about the whole thing. He is very impressed, at any rate, and can hardly believe his luck that he has found himself a connection to a Duke through his dear old aunt.”

“Yes, the Duke of Calder is here.”

“But I am told that he is a *young* man, so I can only assume that the Duke of Calder that I was once acquainted with no longer walks the earth. What a shame, he must have passed as a relatively young man. Relative to me, of course.”

“He was but eight and fifty I believe.”

“And when did he pass?”

“Eight months ago.”

“And tell me who has succeeded him. Is it a distant relative, a nephew or some such? I do not remember the Duke and his Duchess having any children.”

Georgina did not know how to proceed. She still did not know what part Beatrice had played in the whole thing. Elizabeth was the one who had brought the child into Ashdown so many years before, but it was clear that Beatrice knew every detail.

“Why did my grandmother bring a baby into our home one and twenty years ago?” Georgina clasped her hands behind her back, not keen for the old woman to see how they shook.

“A baby?” Beatrice said vaguely.

“No, no, no! You will not do this again. I do not know if your mind truly wonders, Beatrice Ellington, or if it is another of your cruel and twisted games. But you will answer me this time, and I shall not leave until you do.”

“So like Elizabeth,” she said and smiled almost warmly.

“I am nothing like my grandmother because I care. I care about right and wrong, and I care about the truth, and it strikes me that the two of you cared about nothing but yourselves. Whatever it is you and my grandmother did all those years ago, its repercussions, its evil effects, have spanned a generation. The cold blackness of your heart has trickled down the years and still affects good people. You will answer me; I will not leave until you do.”

Georgina stepped towards the bed and took hold of the bell rope which hung alongside. She gently pulled it out of the old woman's reach and laced the end of it around a hard wooden chair before turning to look at Beatrice significantly.

"A trustee from the Hatfield orphanage approached your grandmother because there was no room for his latest foundling. So you see, your grandmother was not quite as cold as you would paint her."

"This is a lie, a very obvious lie. You know why I am here, Beatrice."

"*Lady* Wighton."

"Not to me," Georgina said and eyed the disarranged bell rope once again. "I shall say it again, you know why I am here."

"I know of a child, yes."

"His name was Samuel White."

"I know."

"He grew up as a servant in my home."

"I know."

“But was he truly a servant?”

“I had thought that he would remain a servant until this day, Miss Jeffries. But your arrival here has told me very clearly that the little waif who used to clear the horse muck from your stables has managed to claw his way into the aristocracy. I wonder what his friends and neighbours think of that.”

“I beg your pardon?” Georgina said, her mouth going dry, she played for time.

It was clear to her that Beatrice was issuing a threat. And if anybody would spit such venom and make it known that the Duke of Calder’s parentage was not as clear-cut as some might think, it was Beatrice Ellington. The Beatrice Ellington of old, the same Beatrice Ellington who had so easily looked upon her brother’s heartbreak and shrugged it off as if it were nothing.

Georgina felt suddenly afraid, suddenly concerned that she was about to make the worst mess possible of it all; would it finally be her fault? Would Georgina be the one who would unmask the Duke of Calder and reveal Samuel White there underneath?

“I know what you are trying to do, Miss Jeffries. I knew it before you had even climbed into your carriage to make your way here. As soon as my nephew told me that you were on your way to see me, I knew.

So, Samuel White has made himself the Duke of Calder. My advice to you and to him is to say nothing and be glad of it. He could have spent the rest of his life as a servant in your father's house, so his own best interests can only now be served by keeping his eye on the better chance. Why does he need to know where he came from? More to the point, why do *you* need to know it? If you are in love with him, you silly girl, just marry him. Does it really matter who he is?"

"It does not matter to me, Beatrice. But it matters to Samuel."

"And does it matter so much to him that he would risk going back? Would he be happy to give up his fine clothes and his great estate in favour of returning himself to the peasant he once was?"

"Samuel was never a peasant."

"If he continues in this, I can assure you he will be." Beatrice tried to raise herself up on her elbows.

The effort was making her face grey, and her bones seemed to protrude sharply from the many folds of her crisp white nightgown. It was a hellish sight, and one that Georgina knew she would never forget.

"Why? What has he done to you to make you so hateful? And what did he ever do to my grandmother that she could treat him so

carelessly? What evil scheme did the two of you hatch between you like some ugly, deformed baby bird?"

"I will not help you, Miss Jeffries." She was still, unbelievably, managing to hold her stance, perched in mid-air with the effort of holding her head up so clear upon her face. "I will not help you a moment longer."

"You have not helped me from the beginning."

"No, and the idea that you have come all this way for nothing gives me a pleasure that a silly, romantic little girl like you could never understand."

"I would never wish to understand it, you vile, hateful woman."

"What a way for us to part." Beatrice began to laugh, and the effort of it forced her to collapse back into her pillows. "Still, I would not have had it any other way. But you must tell the new Duke of Calder this from me," she said and took a deep breath.

"Tell him what?"

"Tell him to leave it alone. If he continues in his pitiful quest to discover his origins, I will squash him like a bug between my fingers," she said and held out a bony finger and thumb which she mashed

together gleefully by way of demonstration.

“And if he *does* leave things alone?” Georgina said, her voice trembling.

“Then I shall leave him alone.”

“What can you possibly have to hide at your age? What can you need to protect when all those who were closest to you are in the grave?”

“Pass on my message,” Beatrice said and glared at her. “And do not ever come back into this room again, or all of England will know the Duke of Calder for the servant that he is.”

Without a word, Georgina turned and walked out of the room. She closed the door behind her without a backward glance, never wanting to set eyes on such a vicious creature again.

She took a few steps down the corridor before leaning heavily against the wall, drawing in great gasps of breath with which to steady herself.

There was so much to tell Emerson that she did not know where to begin. And it was such news that she hardly thought she could tell him at all whilst they were still guests in Lord Wighton’s home.

Although Beatrice had given her very little, at least Georgina now knew that she had been greatly involved in the placement of Samuel White at Ashdown manner. It was not simply that Elizabeth Jeffries had orchestrated the whole thing, and Beatrice was aware of it. No, it was certainly beyond that.

Beatrice had been so angry, so vehement, so spiteful, that she had to be very closely involved. She had something to hide, even now. She had something she wanted to protect fiercely, some secret she was hiding.

Georgina could not begin to imagine what that would be now that the woman's nearest family were dead. Was she protecting herself? Was she simply protecting her own reputation? What did it matter now when she was never in anybody's company anymore? Beatrice was a bedridden old woman who never even made it to the drawing room. What was so worth hiding that she could not relent at this stage in her life and put a good young man's heart at rest?

Georgina decided to only give Emerson the bare bones of the thing until they were on their way home again, safely away from Wighton Hall and never to return.

But there was one final thing that she could do before they left that place once and for all. She would find some way to get Oscar Montgomery alone so that she might speak to him in private. She

would gently dig until she found something of interest, however small, and use it to keep looking.

She would not bow to the threats of such a hateful old woman, especially one who was bedridden and seemingly had little contact with the outside world. Whatever inquiries she continued to make back in Devon or Hertfordshire would surely never reach her ears.

With a shudder, Georgina realized that she did not entirely believe that herself.

Chapter 28

The following morning, Georgina rose early and packed the last of her things. She had packed the majority of her belongings the night before, just prior to climbing into bed. There would be little time the following day, and she had known that she would need to make the best of it.

Georgina was the first to breakfast, finding herself curiously hungry and pleased to be alone for a few minutes so that she might satisfy that hunger in peace.

She helped herself to bacon and tomatoes and cut herself a thick slice from the large pound cake on the sideboard. She ate quickly, wanting her breakfast to be done so that she would be ready to speak to the Earl wherever she might find him. Georgina knew that she needed to speak to him alone to get the best out of the situation.

If she spoke in front Emerson, her line of questioning might make him suspicious, and she had yet to tell him the full horror of her interview with Beatrice the day before. She had yet to tell him of the threat that had been made.

Georgina also thought that the Earl might be more open to answering questions if she spoke to him alone. She had no doubt at all that his

answers might well be a little guarded in the presence of the Duke for, despite a full week in his presence, the Earl was still tripping over himself to impress Emerson.

With her breakfast eaten, Georgina still felt curiously hungry. She poured herself another cup of tea and rose to hurriedly cut another, smaller slice from the pound cake.

Just as she took her first bite, Branton Montgomery, the Earl's youngest son, walked into the room.

"You are very early," he said with his customary flat and disinterested tone. "I am not used to taking breakfast with anybody else present."

"Not even your brother?"

"Him least of all. He sleeps later than father does." Branton shrugged and smiled and suddenly looked like a different man altogether.

Georgina realized she had not seen him smile genuinely throughout the entire week of her stay. And yet now he smiled quite naturally, and his flat tone gave every appearance of taking a turn for the better.

He was quite a handsome young man really, or at least one who was certainly made more handsome when his mood improved. As he helped himself to a tremendous plate of breakfast, Georgina studied

him thoughtfully. He began to look at ease as if he did not mind at all sharing his ordinarily solitary breakfast hour with a house-guest he had barely paid any heed to in a full seven nights.

“Is the pound cake as heavy as it looks?” He turned to look at her and then back at the cake.

“Well, it is not light, put it that way,” Georgina said tactfully. “Although it is very tasty.”

“I think I will give that a miss then,” he said and set down a plate so laden with food that Georgina hardly thought he would have room for pound cake anyway.

Branton Montgomery sat down and tucked into his breakfast with surprising speed. They sat in silence for some moments, Branton most determined about his breakfast as Georgina nibbled at the last of her pound cake.

“I expect you will be glad to get away from this place,” Banton said quite suddenly when his meal was just halfway eaten. “It must be annoying for the Duke to be paraded before company everywhere he goes.”

“I suppose a Duke simply gets used to it.”

“He certainly accepts it all with good grace. I must admit, I do not think he is in the common way.”

“He is certainly not an arrogant man,” Georgina agreed and nodded thoughtfully.

“No, he is very far from what I was expecting,” he said and speared a black pudding on the end of his fork before popping it into his mouth and chewing it thoroughly. He stared off into the distance as he swallowed the great mouthful and then continued, “I suppose I am just used to my father and his idea that a man is nothing without a great title.”

“Well, I know that the Duke does not think in those terms, and neither do I,” Georgina said encouragingly. “But I understand how perpetual exposure to such ideas might well affect a person.”

“Thank you, that is very understanding.”

“And there really is more to life than a title. I cannot help thinking that the responsibilities that come along with it could easily become very tying, binding almost. Perhaps there is more freedom in life without it. After all, a person is then left to themselves, and when left to themselves, a person can simply be himself. I suppose what I am trying to say is that you really are free to follow your own passions in life; you may choose to do whatever suits you and pleases you without

worrying that it does not fit the responsibilities of the estate and the county."

"You probably think this very silly, but I have never thought of it that way before. I suppose I am too used to hearing my father's version of things that I have fallen into the habit of feeling myself to be second best."

"Well, I suppose somebody has to be born first. But I am bound to say that I would always choose to be born second."

"I daresay then it is a case of finding what makes one happy and forgetting about all the rest of it."

"Quite so," Georgina said with a smile and took the last bite of her pound cake. "Would you care for some more tea?" she asked as she lifted the teapot.

"Yes please." He had relaxed so much in her company he seemed almost like a brand-new person.

At that moment, Georgina wondered if she would not be better placed asking her questions of Branton, now that they had become allies. She had already warmed to the young man in those few minutes more than she had to his father over a full week.

If only she had conversed with him a little more in the last days, perhaps she would have found out something of interest and spared herself that final, dreadful confrontation with Beatrice.

“Tell me, how do you get along with your Great Aunt Beatrice?”

“I hardly think of her as my aunt at all. She is, of course, only an aunt by marriage as opposed to blood, and I am afraid to say that I find myself rather glad of that. I know that you came here specifically to see her, Miss Jeffries, but I do not like her at all. In truth, I can hardly imagine that anybody on this earth would have travelled so many miles to see such a spiteful old woman.”

“Yes, she is rather terse,” Georgina said and nodded vigorously.

“But then you had never met her before, had you? So, I suppose you had no idea.”

“To be honest, I did have *some* idea,” Georgina began cautiously.

“How so?” Branton looked bright and interested, a far cry from the young man she had first set eyes on just a week before.

“I saw some old letters from Lady Beatrice to my grandmother, very old letters. Anyway, I am bound to say that the tone of them was far from pleasant. But it did spark my curiosity, I must admit.” Georgina

was pleased to see that he looked more interested than ever.

“Good heavens, what were the letters about, if I am not being too delicate in asking?”

“No, not at all.” Georgina smiled. “If you know her well, I daresay they will not shock you.” She paused before continuing, “It would appear that my grandmother, Elizabeth Jeffries, was once courting Beatrice’s brother, David. Beatrice had ambition enough for both young women and convinced Elizabeth to set her sights on Baron Jeffries instead. It would seem to have left David brokenhearted, and yet Beatrice’s letters suggested that the idea did not bother her at all.”

“I can quite imagine that.”

“I am sure that you know her very well. With her husband having passed so long ago, I suppose your father was already the Earl here before you were born.”

“Yes, my brother was a baby when my father became the Earl of Wighton. I was not born for another four years.”

“If your great-aunt is anything like my grandmother, it cannot have been easy growing up in the same house.”

“Fortunately, she did not live here at the time. She lived with her

daughter in the largest lodge out on the estate. We rarely saw her, but I am bound to say that whenever we did, it was far from pleasant."

"Did you get on with her daughter? What was her name?"

"Esme Montgomery," he said and squinted as if he was looking back into the past. "I liked her, what I knew of her. But she always seemed so sad, and Beatrice rarely brought her to the hall with her when she came. She was quite reclusive, I suppose."

"And she passed away quite young, I believe?" Georgina said gently.

"Yes, not long after she went away, I believe."

"Went away?"

"I am afraid that I cannot remember all the details, Miss Jeffries, but Esme Montgomery had suffered some sort of mental frailty. I never saw the evidence of it myself, but I was just a child, and I rarely saw her anyway. Even when I think of her now, I cannot draw to mind any conversation I had with her. All I have is a simple impression of her from afar, so pale and fair, and a look of what I suppose one might call melancholy."

Something about his description of Esme Montgomery gave Georgina a chill. She could not help thinking that he was describing the young

lady who had paced the lawns of Ashdown Manor before being roughly drawn away by Georgina's grandmother. Could that have been Esme Montgomery?

"You said she went away?"

"Yes, I believe it became necessary for Beatrice to have her committed to an asylum. It was some years ago, and I was just a boy really. And I have a recollection that she had not been there for very long before she passed away."

"That really is so very sad."

"Yes, it is when one thinks of it. I must admit, I do not think of her very often, but when I do, I truly get a sense of that melancholy. I was only young, as I have said, but I am certain that she was a very far cry from her own mother. I do not think that Beatrice had much regard for her, as I recall."

"No, the way she has spoken of her to me these last days would lead me to conclude the very same."

"Tell me, Miss Jeffries, was it worth coming all this way to see her?"

"In some ways, yes," Georgina said thoughtfully. "It is true that I have found her extraordinarily unpleasant, even more unpleasant than the

dreadful letters I found would have suggested. But I suppose it has satisfied that curiosity and stopped me wondering about the sort of woman who could be so very callous and casual with her own brother's feelings."

"Yes, I can understand that. And I believe poor David Ellington has lived a very lonely sort of a life. He never married, and now I suppose I understand why. Perhaps he never stopped loving your grandmother, Miss Jeffries."

"Perhaps not. The idea that he spent the rest of his life alone is very sad, and I must admit that it makes me a little ashamed of my grandmother for her behaviour. After all, we cannot blame the whole thing upon Beatrice."

"I have never met David, but I imagine that he is a very nice man. As far as I know, he has had no contact with Beatrice for many years, and now I daresay I have the reason why. But I am sure that he lives a happier life without her, and even if he has kept to himself all these years, from what you say about your grandmother, he was likely better off without her too." Branton looked apologetic.

"Yes, I cannot help but agree. I knew my grandmother well enough, and suffice it to say that I did not mourn her passing," Georgina said and then a thought came to her suddenly. "Forgive me, but you talk of David Ellington as if he still lives. Is that the case?"

“Yes, as far as I am aware, he still lives. I know that he and Beatrice were not close, but she would most certainly have received notification if he had passed away, for she would be his only surviving relative. An heiress to his estate, I daresay.”

“Where does he live?”

“As far as I know, he is still in Devonshire. I have a recollection of Beatrice saying he had sold the old family home when he inherited it, but I understood that he did not go far.”

“Oh, how interesting. I wonder where he is now,” Georgina said airily, although she truly had every intention of discovering the whereabouts of David Ellington.

“If you ever happen upon the old chap, do give him my best. I know I have never met him, but I do have some sympathy with him,” Branton said and then turned his attention to the remainder of his breakfast.

“I most certainly shall,” Georgina said gently. “And thank you, you really have been more helpful than you could possibly know.” How glad she was to have happened upon Branton Montgomery that morning, for she was certain he had been of more help than his father would have been.

“You are welcome, Miss Jeffries,” he said and looked genuinely pleased to have been able to help her.

Chapter 29

“I do hope he is not too frail, Georgie. I should hate to do or say anything to upset the man. After all, he had enough to put up with in the early part of his life, did he not?” Emerson said as his carriage bore them just ten miles north to the little town of Kellerton where David Ellington now lived.

They had been returned from Cornwall just four days before Jeremy and Fleur were once again covering for the pair as they met in secret and set off for the home of David Ellington.

Emerson had set his attorney the task of discovering David Ellington’s whereabouts the moment they returned to Devonshire and, efficient as always, the man had come up with an address for him within a matter of days.

Georgina had given Emerson the full details of her final conversation with Beatrice in the carriage as they drove back from Cornwall. She had begun a little tentatively, and then he had assured her that she might speak freely in front of Jeremy and Fleur since they already knew everything there was to know about him to date.

Fleur had been more affected at the retelling of Beatrice’s threat than anybody. She immediately beseeched Emerson to accept life as it was

and to not upset the world that was now his.

Jeremy had also been cautious, but far less so, stating that Emerson should simply hold off his inquiries until he had received firm news that Beatrice Montgomery had finally passed away.

But Emerson had been of the same mind as Georgina on the matter and stated that he would continue to make gentle inquiries on the assumption that a bedridden old woman would never get to hear of it anyway.

The four young people had talked the whole thing back and forth over many miles as they made their way home. In the end, they had come to a consensus and had decided that gentle inquiries could not hurt as long as secrecy was maintained.

Georgina realized that her retelling of her interviews with Beatrice had been so thorough that she had inadvertently persuaded the rest that the old woman had some sort of supernatural powers and that she would know by instinct if they continued in their search for the Duke's true origins. And if she was honest, Georgina had almost come to believe the ridiculous little idea herself.

"Well, we are not bursting in on him unannounced, Sammy. He responded almost immediately to my letter and seems very keen that we should meet," Georgina said.

“Perhaps he has only agreed to see you because you are Elizabeth’s grandchild. Perhaps he thinks that you will look like her or somehow remind him of her.”

“I do hope not,” Georgina said with a shudder. “Really, you remember my grandmother as well as I do, and I am sure that you can see that I look nothing like her.”

“But you and I only knew her as an ageing woman, Georgie. Perhaps she was very beautiful when she was young, and perhaps there might be a resemblance there, however much you would wish to deny it.”

“Is this mischief, Sammy, or are you being quite serious?” Georgina said and almost laughed at her own haughty tone.

“I daresay it is a little of both, with a little emphasis on the former rather than the latter.”

“Well, thank heavens for that,” Georgina said and laughed before turning serious. “Forgive me for saying it again, Sammy, but do you think it is sensible for you to come in also? I mean, what if David contacts his sister, and she discovers that you were here asking questions? Is it not just a little dangerous?”

“If she finds out that *you* were here, it is the same thing. She is a

remarkably clever old woman, Georgina. I know I did not meet her, but from everything you said I simply know it. She had discerned my identity before we had even arrived. She knew that Samuel White had somehow been elevated to the status of a Duke, so if she ever hears that *you* have been to see her brother, I am sure that she would treat the matter exactly the same whether I am here in attendance or not. It is just a risk that I shall have to take, and I am prepared to take it. Georgie, I have been lied to and deflected in my questioning for so many years that I will not allow one more ageing person with secrets to rule my life ever again. Whatever she is protecting means as much to her as finding out my identity means to me. She might well be convincing in her assertion that she will squash me like a bug, but I can only think that so fierce an attack comes from a deep sense of fear."

"You mean that we shall uncover something that she does not want uncovered?"

"Exactly that, and so I say let us uncover it, Georgie." He reached sideways and took her hand. "Let us uncover it all, for good or for ill."

When they finally arrived, it was to find a very neat and well-appointed little manor house in a particularly pretty part of Devonshire. Kellerton, whilst not on the coast as Rowley was, was easily its rival in terms of rolling meadows and soft and pretty countryside.

David Ellington's home was rather larger than she had expected, and the door was answered by a bright and smiling housekeeper in late middle age.

"Your Grace," she said and smiled warmly as she curtsied. "And Miss Jeffries," she went on and curtsied again. "Mr Ellington is expecting you in the drawing room. I will show you the way, and then I shall bring you all some tea."

"Thank you kindly," Emerson said as they followed the housekeeper through the entrance hall and down a narrow corridor.

When they were shown into the drawing room, David Ellington was far from the man that Georgina had imagined. From the moment she had read his heartfelt letter to her grandmother, she had imagined him to be in some way delicate, slim, and with aquiline features and a sensitive face.

But this man, despite his advancing years, was upright and strong and had a surprising build indeed. Anybody looking upon David Ellington in his dotage could be easily persuaded that he had spent his life tending a busy farm.

He was upright, and his shoulders were broad, although whatever muscle had once been there was surely wasting. And yet even in his

old age, he was not stooped in any way. When he had risen from his seat to greet them, it had not been as a creaking old man, but rather as a well-kept man who still had a fine degree of fitness.

“Good afternoon, Miss Jeffries,” he said and smiled at her, his eyes, although as dark as his sister’s, seeming kindly and bright.

He inclined his head graciously and then turned to Emerson.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace.” As he tipped his head forward once more, Georgina could see that there was very little difference in height between the two men, and she found her spirits suddenly soaring when she realized that David Ellington was by no means the pitiful creature she had imagined.

Somehow his health and vitality, the fact that he was not also bedridden, seemed to her like a victory over his sister Beatrice. And a victory very well deserved, she was sure.

“Good afternoon, Sir,” Emerson said respectfully and returned the bow.

“Mr Ellington, thank you so very much for agreeing to see us today.”

“How could I not see you, Miss Jeffries? You must understand that I was full of curiosity. That Elizabeth Allencourt’s granddaughter would

contact me after so many years was a treat that I could not possibly forego." He smiled happily and did not seem at all upended by their visit.

In no time at all, the party was settled with tea and sandwiches, and Georgina found herself so at ease in David Ellington's company that it loosened her tongue.

"I must be honest, Mr Ellington, and say that I knew nothing of your existence prior to coming to visit my relations in Devonshire. I did not even know of your sister's existence, for my grandmother never spoke to me about her. Although it is true to say that my grandmother rarely spoke to me unless it was to chastise me for something."

"That sounds about right, my dear," he said with a laugh. "Although I am bound to say that it was not always the case. It is true that Elizabeth Allencourt was a fiery sort of a girl, and she certainly never got along with her sister Mirabelle. Oh, and Mirabelle was such a dear, it would seem impossible that anybody could have any objection to her. But Elizabeth did, and I had always assumed it to be nothing more than a little rivalry between sisters. Mirabelle was very pretty, but then so was Elizabeth." He laughed again.

"But you are not surprised to learn that my grandmother was quite sour by the time I was born? For I had never known her to be any different."

“No, I am not surprised at all.”

“Forgive me, Mr Ellington, but is that because of the influence of your sister?”

“Well, you have met her, my dear, so you have likely seen a little of what she would have been capable of as a young woman. It is true that my sister was something of an anomaly in our family. There was not another one like her, so where she learned to be so cold-hearted, I will never know. And yes, she was a great influence upon Elizabeth Allencourt. I blamed Beatrice for a great many years for coming between the two of us.”

“I believe that you and my grandmother were quite close, Mr Ellington,” Georgina said in a gentle, kindly fashion.

“Oh, how I loved Elizabeth Allencourt. My head was so turned by that young lady that I no doubt ended by making a tremendous fool of myself.”

“I am so very sorry, Mr Ellington.”

“I blamed Beatrice for so long because she was very easy to blame. She was such an unpleasant creature, almost evil at times, that she was the perfect target for my anger and disappointment. But in the

end, Miss Jeffries, there was only one person to blame for it all, and that was Elizabeth Allencourt herself."

"Yes, she was not a pleasant lady."

"And as nice as she could be as a young woman, she was not at all simpleminded. I do not believe for a minute that she was an innocent who had been so easily overpowered by my sister. A person cannot be turned into such an ambitious and uncaring person if they have not already a mind to be that way in the first place. But I loved her so much, I was so infatuated, that I could not see it. I refused to see it."

"And I suppose a thing like that has quite an effect upon a man," Emerson said in solidarity. "We have our finer feelings too, do we not?"

"We most certainly do, young man, and you would be well advised never to deny them. At least not to yourself, at any rate. I am rather afraid that my generation was brought up to be very different; the men that is. We were not taught to *hide* our feelings, but rather to not have any in the first place." He reached for his tea and smiled, his lined skin wrinkling pleasingly at the corners of his eyes.

Georgina smiled, warmed by his elderly grace and that feeling of security that comes from being in the company of a person who has not only grown old but has grown wise with it.

“I thank you for that advice, Mr Ellington, and I shall concentrate on taking it.”

“It will come to you; I can see it in your face.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“So, how is my sister?”

“I believe her character to be largely unchanged, Mr Ellington, although I am bound to say that she is somewhat frail and predominantly bedridden,” Georgina said truthfully.

“Goodness me, that must be irking her,” David said and laughed. “Forgive me, I do not mean to be cruel; I am simply amused by the irony of it all. I had always thought that her body would go before her mind did.”

“It would certainly seem to be the case, although I believe she uses a pretense of mental frailty at times to suit her own purposes,” Georgina went on.

“I do not doubt it for a moment. If she is no longer able to get about, Beatrice will find other ways in which to amuse her twisted humour.

“Did you ever hear from my grandmother again after the two of you parted?”

“No, not once. I had sent her a letter not long after her marriage to your grandfather. I had already begun to foster the opinion that I perhaps had something of a lucky escape.”

“I can assure you, Mr Ellington, that you did.” Georgina laughed.

“But I still loved her back then, and I wanted her to know it. Not that I wanted to upset her marriage or anything of that nature; I just wanted her to know that I did not harbour any ill will towards her. But I never received a reply, and to be honest, I had not expected one.”

“And what of Beatrice?”

“Once she had moved to Cornwall, I never saw her again until our father died. He had lived long, lasting two years more than Beatrice’s own husband.”

“Beatrice attended your father’s funeral?”

“Yes, she came back to Rowley with her daughter, Esme. It was the one and only time I have ever seen that child, and yet I have never truly been able to get her out of my mind.”

“How so?”

“She would have been barely eighteen years old when I saw her, and hardly like a woman at all. She was such a delicate creature, such pale hair, and a pale face, she was so frail and slight. But the thing I remember most of all is how very cowed she was by her mother. I had been in my sister’s company again not one hour before I realized that she undoubtedly treated her own daughter in the same way that she treated everybody else, perhaps even worse. And to see the young Esme was to see her delicacy and frailty so distinctly; my sister would have despised her for it.”

“I am bound to say that *that* is the impression I got on speaking to Beatrice, although she did not talk of her daughter for long.”

“After my sister returned to Cornwall, I never heard from her again until I received one final letter. For some reason, she had chosen to write to me to tell me that my poor dear niece had died at the County Asylum in Ainsley.”

“Ainsley?” Emerson said and looked confused.

Georgina looked from one man to the other and wondered what had stirred Emerson so.

“Yes, my sister told me that her daughter had been committed to the

County Asylum when she was but eight and twenty years old and that she had died there just two years later. I cannot think of it even now without the sadness of realizing that I am still alive in this world, aged and of little use to anybody, and that young, beautiful creature has already been dead these eleven years. I daresay it is all part of God's plan, but I am afraid that the understanding of it evades me."

"But Ainsley is the County Asylum here in Devonshire, Mr Ellington," Emerson said as he put down his cup and saucer. "Surely it would have been the thing to have had her committed to the County Asylum in Cornwall. For her to have been in Devonshire would have made it incredibly difficult for her mother to visit."

"Knowing my sister as I do, I daresay that was all part of it. She wanted her out of the way, forgotten."

"Dear me, what an awful thing," Georgina said and was suddenly hit by a little wave of emotion as she imagined the poor young woman hidden out of the way, so alone in a county that she had not grown up in and with her family so far away. "How abandoned she must have felt."

"If she had the capacity for it, my dear. I am bound to say that I do not know the extent of her mental frailty," David Ellington said with a sigh. "All I know is what I see before me, a lovely young woman who has more kindness and caring in the smallest corner of her soul than

her own grandmother had from head to toe." He smiled at her warmly. "I am very pleased to say that you are by no means your grandmother's granddaughter, my dear."

"Thank you kindly, Mr Ellington. I cannot tell you what that means to me."

They spent the rest of the afternoon in convivial conversation, with Georgina pleased to discover that David Ellington had had a most contented life, following his own passions for painting and literature.

He was by no means the sad and lonely figure that she had imagined, but rather a man who had followed the bachelor's life in complete comfort and contented happiness.

It was with some regret that their afternoon finally came to an end, and they left David Ellington with a firm promise that they would call upon him again in the future.

Chapter 30

“I cannot thank you enough for coming with me today, Jeremy. It really would have been too much of a risk for Emerson to come along, although I suppose this particular inquiry is a risk anyway.”

They had just drawn up on the great gravel apron in front of the large and imposing County Asylum known as Ainsley. It was built of a much darker stone than any other building she had seen in Devonshire, and it gave it such a sinister air that Georgina shuddered involuntarily.

She was glad that she had chosen to ask Jeremy to come with her and even more glad that she had not risked insulting Fleur in the process.

Fleur really did wear her heart on her sleeve, and it would have done no good to take her cousin in and have her so openly disturbed throughout the entire thing. It would have put Georgina off dreadfully, and she knew it.

In the end, however, Fleur had been relieved that her brother had stepped into the breach and had declared that he would accompany Georgina to the County Asylum.

“Yes, I suppose this is the one line of inquiry that is the riskiest of them all. After all, although Lady Esme Montgomery has been dead

these eleven years, the warden might still feel a certain duty to make contact with her mother as a result of our inquiries. Especially if he distrusts us, my dear."

"Then I shall have to do everything in my power to appear trustworthy," Georgina said and sighed.

"Now come along, you can manage this very well. Do not suddenly lose your courage, Georgina, for I am afraid to tell you that the responsibility is yours entirely. Although he would not do so openly, Emerson is relying on you just as he did in Cornwall. So, do not underestimate your abilities in this area, for it is clear to me that the Duke of Calder does not underestimate them. If he is so convinced that you are capable, then you are capable, do you hear me?"

"My goodness, I do not think I have ever heard you speak so sensibly, *so seriously*, Jeremy," she said with wide eyes. "And I am bound to say that it is unsettling."

"You must not be unsettled by it, my dear. You must take heart and do what must be done. The time has come for you to discover Emerson's true origins, and I think you know that everything seems to rest upon that."

"What do you mean?"

“Emerson is very keen to discover that he truly is a man of some standing before he can get on with his life. And by *get on with his life*, I am sure that you rightly perceive that I mean marriage and children and what have you. With you, obviously.”

“He told you all of this?”

“No, he told me some of it, and the rest I simply extrapolated from the data I did have.”

“In other words, you are making it up.”

“No, I had the bare bones of it from the man himself, and I think you know very well that my own perception is not only correct but very much as your own is.”

“You are far more intelligent and far less silly than I have previously given you credit for,” Georgina said with a mischievous smile.

“Let us make our way into the asylum, my dear, and hope we find a more sensible conversation there,” he said and returned her smile.

Georgina was relieved to find that the inside of the asylum was far less austere and sinister than the outside. It looked clean and bright, with white painted walls and a good deal of light coming in through the large windows.

The only things that would easily remind one that they were in an asylum were the occasional cries and wails of the inmates, the ones who could not be soothed.

They were shown into the office of Dr Martin Ellis in no time at all, and he greeted them with such alacrity that Georgina found herself surprised.

She had quite imagined that he would be suspicious of their intentions and perhaps even refuse to see them. When she found him most open to their visit, she was greatly relieved.

“And you are acquainted with Esme Montgomery’s mother, Lady Wighton?” Dr Ellis said with interest.

“Yes, Beatrice Montgomery and my grandmother, Baroness Elizabeth Jeffries, were childhood friends. They maintained their friendship throughout their lives, although I am bound to say that it was latterly by correspondence. My grandmother moved to Hertfordshire, you see.”

“I see,” Dr Ellis said with a smile. “Well, tell me how it is that I may help you, Miss Jeffries.”

“I had really wanted to know a little something of Esme Montgomery.

I am greatly interested in the history of our two families and to find out a little something of Esme would help me to fill in a few gaps. It is all very sad, I understand, and dear Beatrice was still too upset to say much of it. And she is advancing in years now and forgets a great deal." Georgina felt terrible telling such an outright lie to a man who seemed to be so very open to helping her.

However, she did not want to risk leaving that place without as much information as possible. Ever since Branton Montgomery and then David Ellington had described the young Lady Esme Montgomery, Georgina had been convinced that she must surely have been the young lady she had seen so distressed upon the lawn of Ashdown Manor that day so many years ago. She knew that she was important somehow, a pivotal part of the whole story.

And she knew that if she did not get to the bottom of the whole thing sooner or later, there was a great chance that she and Emerson would never progress beyond the point of being friends.

"Well, I can tell you that Esme Montgomery was committed to this asylum shortly before I arrived here. I was a local physician with a great interest in mental infirmity, and when the position arose to take charge of this place, I seized it with both hands." He paused for a moment and smiled, clearly still content with the decision he had made. "So, Esme Montgomery was admitted some thirteen years ago by my predecessor, a few short months before I arrived. My first and

abiding impression of her was a woman trapped in the deepest melancholy. She was never particularly agitated, although my predecessor's notes would suggest that she was when she first arrived. I have often wondered if her melancholy and sense of resignation had more to do with her admittance to Ainsley than her condition. Although I must say that her mother was most determined that the young woman could not be managed in the world any longer and that her continued stay at Ainsley was absolutely necessary."

"But you did not think it so?"

"She was clearly in need of some assistance, that much was true. She struck me as a young woman who was simply waiting to die, a woman who no longer had any enthusiasm whatsoever for life. But I could not help wondering if that could not have been remedied to some extent if she had been kept at home where she had access to friends and family."

"Did anybody ever visit her here?"

"If they did, then it would have been in the very early stages when my predecessor was still incumbent. But it is true to say that I have never known anybody to visit Esme Montgomery since I have been in my current position."

"Goodness me, how very sad," Georgina said and once again had the

greatest sense of abandonment and wondered what on earth had happened for poor Esme Montgomery to deserve such a fate.

“As sad as it is, I am bound to say that it is extremely common. People pay for their relatives to be kept out of their lives, and they do not want to be reminded of their existence. I am sure you realize that society views mental infirmity as a failing, and the families of such people are usually subject to the greatest weight of shame imaginable. They do not see such illnesses with the same compassion as they might look at a physical injury of some sort. And it is especially true of the upper classes and most particularly the aristocracy. Once they have placed their relative in just such a place, they do not visit them in the hopes that everybody around them will either not know or will quickly forget. It is a great shame, but there it is.”

“And it was Lady Beatrice who paid for her daughter to remain here?”

“Yes, Lady Beatrice and, I believe we received an extraordinarily large donation from another source. Baroness Elizabeth Jeffries, as a matter-of-fact,” he said wide-eyed. “Goodness, that is how the name was so familiar to me. Your *grandmother* had been the lady who made a very great donation at the time of Esme Montgomery’s admittance.”

“That is very interesting, Dr Ellis. I had no idea that my grandmother had been so charitable.” Georgina tried to smile, but she knew that her grandmother was anything but charitable.

No doubt there was some cold calculation in her donation to the previous warden. Perhaps it had *convinced* the man that Esme Montgomery really did belong in an asylum instead of just at home where the smallest amount of loving kindness might have gone a long way to curing her maladies.

“We are very grateful to all our benefactors, Miss Jeffries, for a place such as Ainsley is not cheap to run.”

“Quite so, Sir,” she said and then suddenly another question occurred to her. “Tell me, did Lady Beatrice attend her daughter’s funeral? I am assuming that it took place here in Devonshire given that this is where she died.”

“Funeral?” Dr Ellis placed both of his palms on the desk in front of him and leaned back, pushing down hard on them. “What funeral, my dear?”

“Esme Montgomery’s funeral, Dr Ellis.”

“Miss Jeffries, Esme Montgomery never had a funeral.”

“She never had a funeral? But why?” Georgina said reeling.

“Because she did not die, Miss Jeffries.”

“Are you absolutely sure, Dr Ellis?”

“Given that I have only seen the lady this morning, Miss Jeffries, I can tell you with certainty that Esme Montgomery is still very much alive.”

Chapter 31

Dr Ellis was so quick to allow her to visit Esme Montgomery that she realized he was actually relieved that the poor woman finally had somebody from the outside world to see her.

When Georgina had immediately said that she would wish to see her if he would allow it, she had thought for a moment that the doctor might allow his emotions to be seen. At least, if nothing else, Esme Montgomery had Dr Ellis on her side.

“Introduce yourself to her very gently, Miss Jeffries,” Dr Ellis said as the two of them made their way through an extraordinarily long corridor. “She is not given to bouts of wild emotion, so you need not have any concerns there. My only worry is a deepening of the melancholy so you will be careful, will you not?”

“Dr Ellis, I shall be most sensitive, I assure you.”

There had been no question of Jeremy joining her, and he had been left enjoying some light refreshments in the doctor’s office.

“Well, here we are. I shall come in with you for a moment so that Esme realizes it is quite safe, and then I shall leave you, but I shall not be far away.”

“Thank you, Dr Ellis, you have been most kind.”

Georgina was surprised to be walked into a pretty and private bedchamber. It was a room on the far side of the west wing of the building, and it looked out over a beautiful woodland and the lake.

A woman with fair hair sat with her back to them in a chair, staring out of the window. She hardly moved as they entered and did not turn her head to see them.

“Esme, it is Dr Ellis.”

“Good afternoon, Dr Ellis.” Her measured, cultured voice was a far cry from the moans and groans Georgina had heard at the other end of the asylum.

The west of the asylum was a very quiet place, and she wondered if the more manageable inmates were housed there, people just like Esme Montgomery whose conditions did not lead them to behave in a distressing manner.

“I have a visitor for you, Esme.”

“I do not get visitors, Dr Ellis.”

“But Miss Jeffries has come a long way.” At the sound of that name, Esme jumped out of her seat as if she had been fired from a cannon.

She spun around and looked all around the room, her eyes searching for somebody she did not see. Immediately, Georgina realized that she was looking for Elizabeth Jeffries, the old Baroness.

“Esme, my name is Georgina Jeffries. You need have no fear that my grandmother, Elizabeth Jeffries, is here, for she passed away many years ago. You are quite safe, and if you will give me a few minutes of your time, you will find that I am by no meets the same woman that my grandmother was.”

“You do not really look like her,” Esme said, immediately calming down on hearing that the old Baroness was dead. She walked slowly towards Georgina, closely studying her face the whole time. “Perhaps there is a little resemblance, but there is none of the hardness. What did you say your name was again, young lady?”

“My name is Georgina,” she said, and as she regarded Esme closely, she knew without a shadow of a doubt that she was the young woman who had paced the lawns of Ashdown Manor fourteen years before.

“Georgina,” Esme said and smiled. “So, you have come all the way from Hertfordshire to visit me?”

“You know where I am from then?”

“If you are the granddaughter of Elizabeth Jeffries, then you have undoubtedly hailed from Ashdown Manor in Hertfordshire.” Georgina had not expected Esme Montgomery to be particularly lucid, and she had certainly not expected her to be as quick-witted as she seemed to be.

“Yes, that is right. But I am visiting you today from Devonshire, for I have been staying in Rowley with relatives.”

“Rowley?” she said and her eyes, pale and blue, widened with emotion. *Rowley*,” she said again.

“Yes, my relatives live at Winton House.”

“Yes, of course. Elizabeth Jeffries was an Allencourt.” Esme spoke almost as if to herself and nodded gently. “Yes, of course.”

“I am so very glad to finally meet you, Esme,” Georgina said and then turned to look at Dr Ellis in the hope that he would leave them alone for a few minutes so that they might talk in private.

That wonderful and kindly physician immediately perceived her meaning and nodded gently at both women before making his way out of the room and gently closing the door behind him.

“And I am glad to meet you, Georgina. I do not get many visitors. No, I do not get *any* visitors. I have not been visited for more than eleven years.”

“Not even your mother?”

“Yes, she was the only one who came. But she only ever came so that she might tell me that I would never get out of here, that I would never be able to cause her trouble again.” Elizabeth’s shoulders sagged. “Is she still living?”

“She is still living, Esme, but she is old and frail and bound to her bed. She can do you no more harm.” Georgina knew that she spoke out of turn, but it was clear to her from everything that she had learned that Beatrice Montgomery most certainly *had* done her daughter harm.

“That is not a thing to be believed, Georgina. She is not a good woman, and I would beseech you to have nothing more to do with her. If you have met her in this lifetime, swear to me that you will never meet her again. She is the foulest person in creation, a *poison*.”

“I know. She and my grandmother would seem to have been cut from the same cloth.”

“They most certainly were, although my mother outstripped your

grandmother by many a furlong."

"I have seen you before, Esme."

"But you seem too young. I cannot imagine that you have seen me."

"It was fourteen years ago at Ashdown Manor. I know it was you; I am certain of it. You have not changed a great deal I am bound to say."

"When one is in an asylum, my dear, the stresses and strains of ordinary life are non-existent. I have been here in the west wing for many years, and it is so quiet and peaceful. I suppose the peace and solitude stops my hair from turning grey and my skin from turning to powder."

"You were so distressed when I saw you. I was but six years old, or thereabouts, and you were pacing the lawn outside the house as if you were looking for somebody."

"Yes, I remember it. It was not long after then that I was brought here."

"But what happened?"

"To tell you, it would be to tell you something that I have never spoken of before. With your grandmother gone, and my own mother

surely soon to follow, there will soon be nobody left who remembers."

"You may tell me. You may tell me anything in the world, and I will keep it safe."

"It has long passed the point where there is any benefit to be gained from saying it all aloud," Esme said and sighed before turning to look out of the window again.

Georgina had the awful sensation that she might once again be about to hit a dead-end, and she knew she could not let that happen.

"Were you looking for Samuel that day?" Georgina said, following her instincts.

And her instincts served her well, for Esme turned around to face her with such a look of pain that Georgina could have cried.

"He was your son, was he not?"

"Yes, yes he was my son," Esme said, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Without another word, Georgina walked towards her and pulled her into her arms, holding her tightly and allowing her to cry for all she was worth.

“My son, my little boy. Destined to be trapped in servitude his whole life to pay for my mistakes.” She extricated herself from Georgina’s embrace and made her way back to her chair, lowering herself down into it and staring out of the window again.

Georgina continued to stand behind her, speaking gently.

“They took him from you, did they not? Your mother and my grandmother?”

“The Devil himself could not have pared two more suitable friends,” Esme said bitterly. “And their friendship seemed to give them greater power somehow.”

“Esme, what happened?”

“I was but nineteen years old when I first met the Duke of Calder. It was at a week of sporting events held by an Earl on the border between Devon and Cornwall. He was more than seventeen years my senior, and yet I thought I had never seen a more handsome man in all my life. His hair was such a beautiful shade of brown, in some lights almost silvery,” she said and stared off into space.

Georgina felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up; the Duke was certainly Emerson’s father, of that she had no doubt. Perhaps his hair

had simply been more silver than brown by the time he had become acquainted with his own son.

“I knew that he was married, of course, and you must not think that he was an evil man, for he was not. He was just so very sad, so very alone. The Duchess had no time for anything in the world but her illness, although I felt nothing but pity for her on its account. She had been an invalid for so long that it seemed she was simply waiting to die. It was silly, I know, but I fell in love with him, and to my amazement, he fell in love with me also. He came across to Cornwall from Devon at every opportunity, and I spent the happiest moments of my life with him. But our affair did not last long. It had been just a few months when I discovered that I was with child, and I truly did not know which way to turn. I knew I could not tell him, for his life was already so very complicated. But I had nobody else in the world, and in the end, I was forced to tell my mother. In truth, I would have preferred to have told my father, but he had been gone for so long. But had he been alive, I know that he would have understood. He was such a fair and good man, and I would have given anything for him to have been spared; I would even have thrown my mother’s life away in his place.”

“That is perfectly understandable, Esme.”

“But I told her, and it was the worst thing that I could have done. I should just have told the Duke and taken some money from him and

run away. I would have happily lived in anonymity with my child and a story of my origins. But I was young and afraid, and I had this silly notion that my mother would surely help me."

"But she did not."

"No, she only helped herself. And that dreadful woman, Elizabeth Jeffries, helped her.

"What did they do?"

"Well, it was an easy thing to get me away from Wighton Hall. My mother and I lived in the Lodge, and we had very little to do with my father's nephew and his family. They lived in the main hall, you see, and we so very rarely went over there. So, when my mother declared that we were taking an extended trip to the North country, there was nobody, in particular, to think anything of it, let alone be suspicious."

"And did you go to the North country?"

"No, we did not," she said and shook her head bitterly. "We went to Hertfordshire."

"Good heavens, where?"

"We stayed on the very edge of Horley, no less. We were in a little

house, just my mother and I, a place that your grandmother had rented for us. We stayed there throughout my confinement, and I was never once allowed to leave it until after I had given birth." Esme paused for a moment to compose herself. "Elizabeth Jeffries was a regular visitor, and I always dreaded it. When she and my mother were together, they seemed to encourage each other in their cruelty. The things they said and the names they called me I cannot repeat; it was so foul and unfair. Neither one of them understood what it was to truly love another human being. Even if the circumstances were not perfect, it was still love."

"I know." Georgina tenderly laid a hand on Esme's shoulder as she stood behind her.

"And then my child was born. Oh, Georgina, he was the most perfect little boy. He was chubby, and he had the sweetest face, like a little angel. Oh, and he was noisy. He wriggled and made noises all day long."

"Oh, how lovely. How long did you have with him?"

"But three days, Georgina. When it came to the third day, my mother said that she supposed that the child would live, and she seemed most disappointed by it. But since he *had* lived, she had determined it was time to put their plan into action."

“And so, he was sent to my grandmother, to be used by her as a servant at Ashdown Manor?”

“You know the rest?”

“Only that Sammy was brought to us as a baby. I do not remember it, for I was not yet born at that stage, but I have lately discovered it.”

“And you remember Sammy? When you were growing up, you remember him?”

“Oh yes, oh yes I do,” Georgina said as the first of her own tears began to fall.

“I was taken back to Wighton Hall, and I am bound to tell you that I was a broken woman. My mother declared that I would never see Samuel again, and I would simply have to forget him. She talked of marrying me away to various gentlemen, none of whom I had a single interest in. I did not even have an interest in living anymore, not without my child. I beseeched her to let me see him, to let me go to Hertfordshire and at least look at him from time to time. But she denied me, almost keeping me a prisoner in the Lodge for several years. But the pain did not ease, not for a moment. It simply grew and grew as every day passed.”

“But you *did* come to Hertfordshire in the end, did you not?”

“I had spent a good deal of time acquiescing to my mother’s wants and wishes, and in the end, she saw no harm in leaving me to go into town now and again to purchase fabric and other such things. I planned it meticulously, travelling post-chaise from Cornwall to Hertfordshire. It was a terribly long and hard journey, but I did not mind. I was so sure that I would see my boy at the end of it. He would have been eight years old by then, but I knew that I would know his face the minute I set eyes on him.”

“And did you see him? When you came to Ashdown that day, did you see his face?”

“No, your own parents seemed to have no idea who I was. Your father asked me to leave, but I paced the lawn, waiting for any sign of my boy. And then, before I knew it, Elizabeth appeared. She gripped my arm so tightly, and I was so exhausted from my journey that I had no strength with which to fight her. She walked me right off your estate and back into town, putting me on the next mail carriage out of Hertfordshire. She told me never to return or she would tell my mother everything, and I would be all the sorrier for it.”

“I can quite believe that.”

“I had no doubt that she would tell my mother anyway, for Elizabeth Jeffries felt nothing for me. And so, I decided to find the Duke, to tell

him everything and to beg that he rescue our boy from a lifetime of servitude even if I, his own mother, could not save him."

"So you went straight to him? You went to Devonshire?"

"I did, I went to Calder Hall and found him walking on the grounds. The moment he saw me, his eyes lit up, and I fell into his arms. I still loved him you see; I love him even now. None of it was his fault, nor mine. We had simply fallen in love, two wounded people who needed comfort in this world."

"And so, you told him everything?"

"I did, I told him every bit of it, and I told him where our son could be found."

"And he determined to rescue him."

"My goodness, but he was furious. I truly believe that had my mother been in his presence he would have struck her he was so angry."

"But what happened next? How was it you came to be here?"

"When I told my mother that the Duke was going to find our son and release him from servitude, she was furious. She made her way directly to Devon to see him and threatened him that she would tell

the whole county that he had an illegitimate son, and she would see to it that his ailing wife would be the first to know of it."

"Oh, what a dreadful thing."

"She would not even allow him to rescue Samuel and place him somewhere secret, somewhere better. She wanted to punish me, and she wanted to do so by making my child suffer his whole life."

"Did she force you into this place?"

"She realized that I had become a liability to her. She wanted me out of the way, for she knew that the whole county would turn against her if they found out what she had done to her own grandchild." Esme dabbed her face with a handkerchief. "When Elizabeth Jeffries came to visit us so soon afterward, I should have realized that something was wrong. She did not go to the main hall at all, and I began to realize that none of my other relatives knew that she was there. And then they took me out for the day, telling me that they had decided we would talk to the Duke together and work out what could be done for Samuel. I cannot tell you what a relief it was to me, how my heart had sung on that morning."

"But they did not take you to Calder Hall, did they?"

"No, they brought me here to Ainslie. I remember the carriage ride so

clearly, how I had no idea that those were my very last moments of freedom on this earth. We had come to Devonshire, you see, and so I believed that we were going to Calder Hall. Had I realized I was to be incarcerated for the rest of my life, I would have thrown myself out of that carriage to my death."

"But you need not stay here forever. Not if there is someone in this world to care for you."

"But there is no one, my dear. I could never go back to Cornwall. I know my mother is ailing, but I never want to set eyes on her evil face again. And as for my relations, I do not know them, and I do not trust them. My boy is lost to me, a servant whom I do not have the means to help and who would never forgive me for what has happened. I have *nobody*, and it has been many years since I came to that conclusion. I am not entirely discontent here, Georgina. I am resigned to live out my life here and die here, and I shall be glad of it when it comes. I can only hope that I shall one day find my boy in heaven, and that he will forgive me."

"I do not think you need wait that long."

"What do you mean? Is he still with you? Does he still work at Ashdown Manor? But surely he would never forgive me."

"No, Sammy is not in Hertfordshire anymore. The Duke really *did*

rescue him."

"What do you mean?"

"Shortly after my grandmother died, he had Sammy taken from Ashdown Manor in the middle of the night. He kept him safe with his attorney for a little while until the Duchess finally died, and he could bring him home. The county believed him to be the invalid child of the Duke and Duchess whose health had happily been restored shortly after his mother had departed this world. He educated him and cared for him, and now he is the Duke of Calder."

"My boy? My boy is saved?"

"He is, although I am very sorry to tell you that your old love passed away some months ago."

"My boy. My darling baby boy," Esme said and dissolved into tears once more.

Chapter 32

“You seem very nervous, Sammy,” Georgina said when they drew up outside the county asylum. “But it really is not so very bad on the inside.”

“It is not that, Georgie. I still cannot believe that I am about to meet my mother. I still can hardly believe the tale of my own origins.”

“Neither can I, but it is all true, Sammy.” Georgina reached out and took his hand, and they sat in the carriage in silence for some minutes before Emerson Lockhart was finally ready to make his way inside and meet his mother for the first time since he had been a tiny baby.

Dr Ellis greeted him warmly and without any of the sycophantic reverence that he ordinarily had to put up with.

In no time at all, they were speeding along the same corridor that Georgina had walked just days before. And what a time it had been, so full of surprise and unbelievable events that she could hardly tell in a straight line when she and Jeremy had made their way back to Calder Hall.

“Well, are you ready?” Georgina said when he finally reached the door to Esme Montgomery’s chamber.

“Yes, I am ready.”

Dr Ellis walked in first and hurriedly told Esme that she had visitors again. This time, Elizabeth turned around immediately, pleased to have visitors and clearly expecting Georgina. She smiled warmly when she recognized her and then looked to the young man at her side.

Her recognition of her son was immediate and just about the most heartwarming and heartbreaking thing that Georgina had ever witnessed.

“My boy,” Esme said and took a step towards him before her legs gave way a little, and she stumbled.

In a heartbeat, Emerson had darted forward and caught her in his arms, holding her tightly to him and looking for all the world as if he would never let her go.

“Mama,” he said simply, his deep voice breaking and giving away his emotions.

Dr Jeffries had left them, and Georgina could not help thinking that she ought to do the same. But she could not turn away; she was rooted to the spot with tears rolling down her cheeks.

“My dear boy, can you ever forgive me?” Esme said, her voice full of pain and happiness all at once.

“There is nothing to forgive, Mama. We were torn apart by others, by two of the most scheming, rotten women in the world. Neither one of us could have fought against them, but we have won in the end, have we not? We have found one another again, and I can assure you that we shall never be parted.”

“My dear Samuel, that you would be so kind as to visit me here in this place.”

“I have no need to visit you here, Mama, for you are not to spend another night under this roof. You are coming home with me this very day. You are coming home to Calder Hall to live in the home of the man you once loved so much.”

“My goodness, I could never have foreseen this day. My dear boy, you must let me sit down for a moment, for I am overcome.”

As Emerson walked his mother over to her little chair and crouched down at her side, Georgina openly cried.

After Emerson and Georgina had spoken with an overjoyed Dr Ellis and told him of their intentions, they made their way back unescorted through the corridor which led to Esme’s room. Emerson reached out

and held her hand as they walked, gripping it firmly.

“And how do you feel now, Sammy?” she said gently as they walked.

“I feel as if I exist, Georgie. I feel it so much, so strongly, that I curiously realize I existed all along.”

“In a curious way, Sammy, that makes sense,” Georgina said and laughed.

“I had thought that it was the most important thing in the world to know that I truly have a place, that I am secure in my title and my lands. And I had wanted that so that I could know deep in my heart that I was good enough for you.”

“You have always been good enough for me, Sammy,” Georgina said and felt her eyes welling with tears as he stopped her and turned her to face him.

“I think I knew that all along, and it was only my own insecurity that needed assuaging. But now that I know that I truly was the son of the Duke and that my mother was the beautiful Lady Esme Montgomery, I realize that their standing and mine never truly mattered. I know who I am now, and everything is different. Even if I had discovered that I was an orphan boy who the Duke had fashioned as a false heir, still I would have been content. Just knowing who my parents are is

enough. It really is the very thing that I was searching for, and now I have it."

"I am so very happy to hear you say that, Sammy. And I am so happy that you know in your heart that you have always be good enough for me."

"Can you forgive me for behaving in such a contrary fashion, kissing you one moment and then holding you at arm's length in the next?"

"Of course I can. You have been through so much in this life, and I wish that things had been different. If only our grandmothers had not been so wicked, surely something good could have been done. They were so very fine at concocting stories, untruths, so why could they not have used that dubious talent for good and not evil? They could have found some way, I am sure, to keep you and your mother together at least."

"But then I would never have known you, would I? If I had never been a servant boy at Ashdown Manor, I would not know you now, Georgie. As curious as it sounds, perhaps some things happen for a reason, even if they *are* so painful."

"I cannot imagine my life without you," Georgina said, and her voice cracked.

“Oh Georgie, I love you so much. I fell in love with you the moment I saw you again in the grounds of Calder on the day of the garden party. Goodness, it seems like so long ago now, and yet it is only a few short months.”

“Yes, but our history spans many years, and I think we have both always felt that immediate closeness.”

“And do you love me too, Georgie? Do you love me as I love you?”

“I love you so much I cannot put it into words, and I can tell you with certainty that I would never be able to love another as I love you.”

Epilogue

“My dear Georgie, that daughter of yours is a most determined little thing, is she not?” Esme Montgomery said as she walked into the drawing room.

“She quite wears me out, Esme,” Georgina said with a laugh and laid her hand on her round belly.

“Perhaps you will have a boy next time.” Esme laughed. “I wonder if boys are perhaps not a little more placid than girls in the beginning.”

“I thank heavens for the nurse, in all honesty,” Georgina said. “For baby Esme has a very strong will indeed.”

“Just like her mother.” Esme, as pale and beautiful as ever, sat on the couch next to her daughter-in-law and took her hand in her own.

“And just like her grandmother,” Georgina said, squeezing Esme’s hand tightly. “And I can only hope that she will have the beauty and fortitude to match.”

“You are too kind, my dear, but I shall accept your compliment for it was so prettily given.”

“And there shall be many more to follow in this happy life of ours.”

Esme had come on in leaps and bounds since she had come to live at Calder Hall. She was still quiet and delicate, but the deep and abiding melancholy had evaporated entirely.

“You do not regret bringing me here from Ainsley? You do not wish that you and Samuel could have started your married life unencumbered?”

“Not for a moment, Esme,” Georgina said genuinely. “These last two years have been the happiest of my life. Finding Sammy after so long, after so many years of wondering what had become of him, and then helping him to find you; goodness, I could never have imagined my life to be so crowded with incident.”

“No indeed, and I truly believe that had it not been for you, my dear, I would never have set eyes on my baby son again.”

“Well, you are here now, the two of you reunited and happy, and I could not be more content, I assure you.”

“I thought I would find the two of you in here,” Emerson Lockhart said as he strode into the drawing room.

He had become very used to being Emerson Lockhart to everybody

else in the world and simply *Sammy* to his wife and mother. He had a place now, a true identity, and if it came with two names, then so be it.

“We were just talking, my dear,” Esme said gently.

“Yes, we were just saying how very settled and content we both are.”

“As am I, as am I. I have my beautiful wife, my beautiful mother, and my beautiful if extraordinarily willful baby daughter. What man could be more content?”

“Well, let us see if we can make you more content still with the arrival of your second child.” Georgina laughed.

“I do hope you are ready for it all, Mama.”

“Me?” Esme said and raised her eyebrows.

“Yes, of course. For I shall need a break when all of this is done, and I am most intent on whisking my wife away for a little trip somewhere. I am afraid that you will be in charge of the children; it is a grandmother’s lot in life I am told.” He smiled warmly at Esme. “And I have no doubt that Fleur will be champing at the bit to come and help you.”

“It is a grandmother’s lot that I am happy to take, for I had never imagined in so many years that I would live to see this day. Not only am I a mother again, but a grandmother, and I thank the Lord every morning when I open my eyes and remember it all.”

“As do I,” Emerson said and looked from his mother to his wife. “I know what I have to be thankful for, and I shall never relinquish my gratitude for as long as I live.”

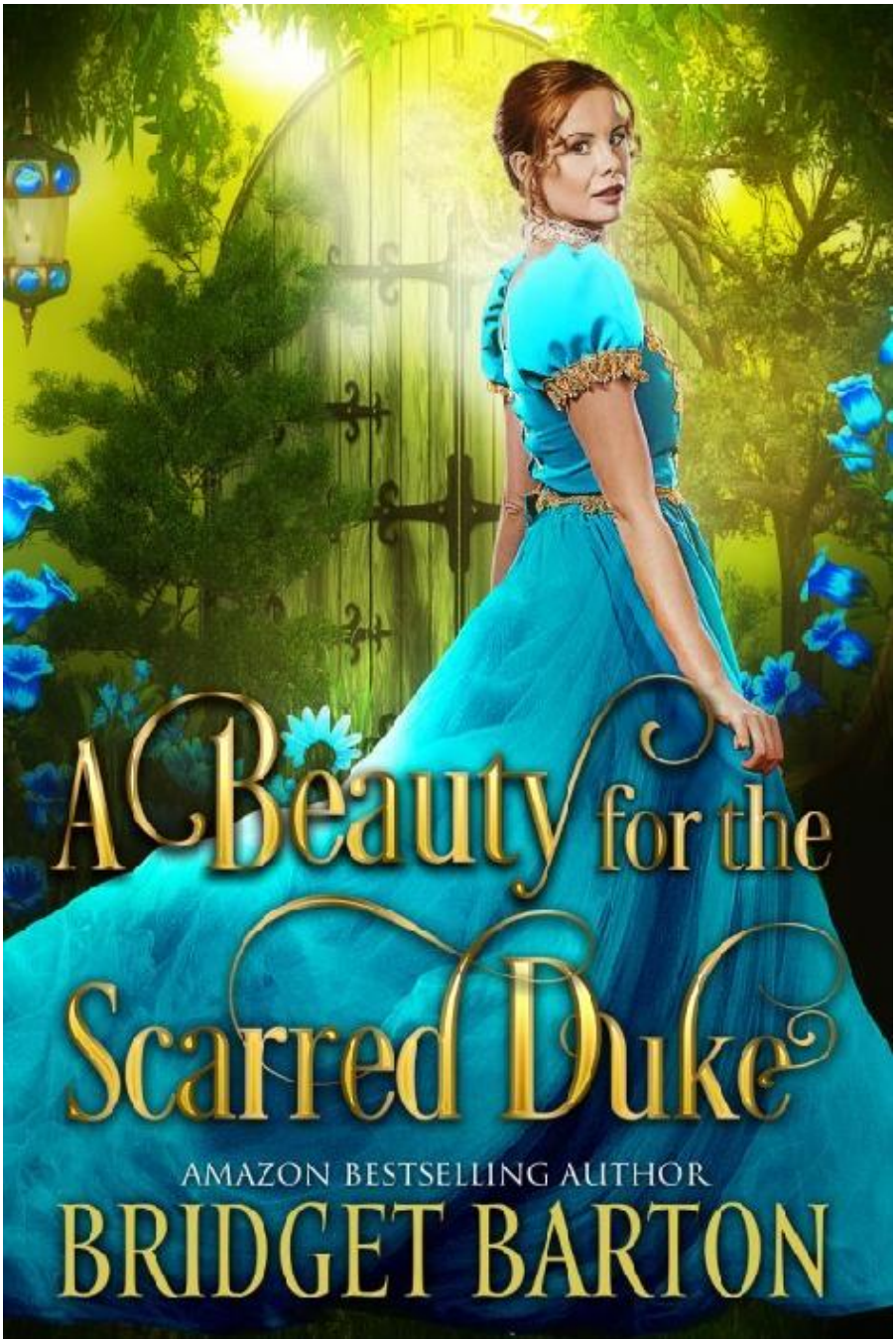
THE END

Can't get enough of Georgina and Emerson? Then make sure to check out the Extended Epilogue to find out…

What is beloved Fleur's luck?
Will Esme be able to recover and be happy again?
What secret did Elizabeth share with David after all?

Click the link or enter it into your browser
http://bit.ly/2Af9AqI

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from **“A Beauty for the Scarred Duke”**, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


A Beauty for the
Scarred Duke
AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BRIDGET BARTON

A Beauty for the Scarred Duke

Introduction

As young girls, Lady Isabella Tate, daughter of the Earl of Upperton, and her friend, Esme, told each other terrifying tales of the monster. But not just any monster. This monster was alive and living in his old mansion behind a tangle of overgrown hawthorn trees in the very same county. This monster was none other than Elliot Covington, the Duke of Coldwell.

The Duke of Coldwell, scarred for life in a fire which claimed the lives of those dearest to him has been hiding in his mansion for almost eighteen years. He knows he is a figure of fear and speculation in the county and chose many years before to live a life of self-imposed isolation. But he is the loneliest Duke in all of England. When the Earl of Upperton sells his daughter off as a bride for the disfigured Duke, Isabella has never been more terrified. Due to marry a man she has never met and always believed to be a monster, she truly believes her life is over.

But is life with the Duke really something to be afraid of? Will Isabella be able to get past her own prejudice and see the man beneath the scars? And will the Duke be able to let go of the pain and guilt that has swallowed him whole for almost two decades and find a new life with a new love?

Chapter 1

“The Duke of Coldwell? Are you absolutely sure you heard your father correctly?” Esme Montague’s voice came out in a high-pitched squeal. “You cannot have that right, Isabella, truly you cannot.”

“I heard my father as clearly as I hear you now, Esme. The whole thing is true, absolutely true.” Lady Isabella Tate could hear the tremor in her own voice.

She was terrified and had been for three successive days. In all that time, she had had nobody to talk to on the matter, not even her own mother. As always, her mother was of little use when it came to her daughter’s defense. The Countess of Upperton was utterly afraid of her husband, the Earl, and would never have gone against him, even if her own daughter’s life depended on it.

“And when did he say it to you? When did your father tell you that you must marry?”

“On Sunday after church. Really, not an hour after I saw you last, my father sat me down and told me that I am to marry a monster. I do not know how I have managed these last days without you, my dear Esme. I have felt so alone.”

Lady Isabella thought back to the afternoon which seemed to have changed everything in her world. Every Sunday, after church, Isabella took refuge in her own room for the afternoon until dinner was served. It was the only day when her father would undoubtedly be at Upperton Hall all day long, the only day he would not be out somewhere on the estate barking instructions at servants, tenants, and stewards alike.

For Isabella, Sundays had their routines, and she had grown accustomed to them. She always kept a good supply of books in her room and seemed to do most of her reading on that day in particular.

However, on the Sunday in question, she had been in her room not more than ten minutes before there came a sharp knock at the door.

Isabella, who had been reclining on her bed to read, still wearing the fine gown that she had worn to church, hurriedly rose to her feet and straightened her clothing out. She hastily raised a hand to her hair, checking that her dark curls were still neatly tucked away, before calling out that her visitor might enter.

“Isabella,” her father said in his customary tone, a sharp and clipped manner, as he entered the room.

“Papa?” Isabella answered, entirely surprised by her father’s presence.

Isabella could not remember the last time her father had visited her in her own room. She thought, perhaps, that it had been a good many years.

Her brother Anthony, who at just fourteen years was almost six years younger than Isabella, had taken the lion's share of his father's attention from the day he had been born. He was, of course, the son her father had always longed for and, from that moment onwards, Isabella had almost ceased to exist.

"I should like you to come down and speak to me in my study as soon as possible, please," he said in the same gruff tone before smartly turning and leaving the room, shutting the door tight behind him.

Isabella had thought instantly that she had done something wrong and spent the next several minutes racking her brains for what on earth it could be. It had been a long time since Isabella had misbehaved; after all, she was not a child anymore. And yet her father's tone could only suggest that she was in some sort of trouble.

And so it was, her insides quaking utterly, that she made her way down to her father's study. As fearful as she felt, Isabella knew that she ought not to keep him waiting long. Nobody who kept her father waiting came out of it unscathed.

By the time she had reached the study door and gently knocked upon

it, Isabella could feel a thin film of perspiration, cold and prickly, on the smooth skin of her back. She was truly afraid.

“Ah, good,” her father said the moment he set eyes on her. “Now, come closer. Stand at my desk,” he instructed when she seemed set to loiter by the door as if ready to make a hasty escape.

Without a word, Isabella did as she was told, moving as silently as a ghost to stand before her father who was sitting comfortably on the other side of his desk, his elbows leaning heavily and his fingers pressed together, forming a steeple.

“I have some news for you, Isabella,” he began, and she thought, for a moment, that he smiled.

Perhaps, after all, she was not in trouble. Perhaps this news was even good news of some sort, something to look forward to and be glad of.

“News, Papa?” Isabella said quietly.

“Yes,” her father said, taking his elbows from the desk and leaning back heavily into the high-backed chair. “You are to be married, my dear.”

“Married?” Isabella’s voice was a little louder than ordinarily it might be.

“Yes, married,” her father confirmed in a level tone which suggested she ought not to begin complaining.

“But Papa, I have not met a young man that I wish to marry.”

“That is of little matter to me, Isabella,” he said dismissively.

“You do not care who it is I marry, Papa?” Isabella said, sensing already that she was tiptoeing onto dangerous ground.

“On the contrary, Isabella,” her father said, his watery dark eyes fixed on her in a way which made her shrink a little. “I have very carefully picked the most suitable husband for you. He is wealthy and titled, and I am content that he shall be able to look after you very well for the rest of your life. He will, in fact, be able to pick up where I am soon to leave off.” He attempted a smile and, in doing so, reminded Isabella of a hunting animal of some sort; a wolf, perhaps.

“And might I ask, Sir, who it is I am to marry?” Isabella said, careful to moderate her tone just enough to put her back in the realm of the dutiful daughter, however much her instincts told her that all was not well.

“You are to marry the Duke of Coldwell,” her father replied with a certain amount of relish.

“The Duke of …?” Isabella could not finish; her throat had gone dry, and her tongue felt glued to the roof of her mouth.

“Coldwell, yes, that is right.”

“But Papa, is he not a good deal older than I am?”

“He is but eight and thirty, Isabella. Eighteen years between man and wife is nothing to be squeamish about, is it?” Isabella could sense that her father was beginning to lose patience with her.

“No, perhaps that is not something to be squeamish about, Papa,” she said and could hardly believe that she continued to speak. “But there is the matter of him being a reclusive monster, renowned throughout the county for being such; that might well be something to be squeamish about, might it not?”

“How dare you?” Already, her father was rising to his feet behind his desk.

“Papa, please,” Isabella said beseechingly, holding both hands out before her and hoping that it would placate him. “I only speak so because I am afraid.”

“You have nothing to be afraid of,” her father said, mercifully retaking

his seat behind his desk. “I have spoken to the man on many occasions, and I do not find him a monster myself.”

Isabella could not take that as any kind of reassurance. Her father was not a good or kind man, and so any recommendation from him was to be viewed with the utmost suspicion, especially regarding another man’s character, not to mention his appearance.

“I see,” Isabella said quietly, her mind racing as she thought how best to proceed.

“And as I have already said, he is a wealthy and titled man. A Duke, no less. There, you will have married very well indeed, will you not?”

“Forgive me, Papa, but is there no other man in the county you might have settled upon as a husband for me? Is there no other who has come to your attention in that regard?” Isabella felt desperate.

“None who has the resources of the Duke, I am afraid,” he responded, flapping his hand dismissively. “And so, I cannot settle for any man other than the Duke, for he is the only one who is content not only to forego any dowry I might be expected to make but to make a settlement upon *you* instead.”

Isabella swallowed hard; at that moment, she knew there would be no escape for her. Although the thing was hardly mentioned, Isabella was

very well aware that her father's estate, the grand Earldom of Upperton, had been failing for many years.

And, above all things, her father was a proud man. He believed wholeheartedly in the aristocracy and the maintenance of family lines and titles, blood, and wealth. More than anything, the Earl of Upperton wanted to hand down a fine and thriving estate to his son. All that mattered to the Earl was his son, and Isabella knew it.

There would be nothing that she could say now to save herself because her father would always put Anthony and his happiness before Isabella and her own.

"Oh, my dear Isabella," Esme Montague said the moment that Isabella had finished telling her every part of the conversation she had had with her father. "It would seem that you were not at all mistaken." Tears shone in Esme's eyes.

"No, please do not cry, Esme. If you cry, then I shall cry. I shall be sunk then, and I do not want to be sunk," Isabella said bravely.

"Forgive me; I shall be brave for your sake." Esme dabbed at the corner of her eye with a neatly embroidered handkerchief. "After all, it is you who has an ordeal ahead, not me."

"Perhaps it shall not be such an ordeal, after all, Esme," Isabella began

with false hope. “Perhaps the man will be very different upon meeting. After all, all we have to judge him on is what we have heard over the years. Neither one of us knows him since *nobody* knows him. Perhaps he is not a monster.”

“Perhaps he is not a monster in his ways, my dear,” Esme said gently.

“But he is very likely to be a monster in his appearance, is he not?” Isabella said, her hope dying. “Is that not what the entire county says about him? That he is too repulsive to be out in society, and so he has shut himself away all these years in that dreadful, overgrown estate.”

And it was true, that was exactly what the people of the county said of him; those who were inclined to gossip, at any rate.

It was said that the Duke had been disfigured many years before, so badly that nobody could look upon him without fear. And because of his disfigurement, the Duke had hidden himself away, refusing all company, intent to see out his years alone.

As children, Isabella and Esme had often told stories of this monster. He had been a feature of their lives, dropping in and out of their world on a whim, making an appearance whenever they felt the need to frighten themselves in that childish, excited way of young girls.

And all the county knew that his estate, the Duchy estate of Coldwell,

was a place out of bounds to all. Its very perimeter was so overgrown with the tallest trees and the densest, sharpest hawthorns, that the hall seemed almost as a fortress, a place from a dreadful fairytale that ought never to be entered by any good soul.

Isabella had seen great swathes of the perimeter for herself over the years, the dense greenery so commonplace to her that it was almost beneath notice. It had been that way for as long as she could remember.

“I wonder why it is that the Duke has never taken a wife before?” Esme said, breaking the silence.

“If he is so disfigured, then I hardly think that there would be a woman who would marry him,” Isabella answered and shuddered involuntarily.

“But so many women, as you now well know, do not have a choice in these matters. So many women of our class are simply forced to marry a man of their father’s choosing, and so it would seem unusual that the Duke has not sought to find a wife by these means before.”

“Perhaps he has not yet met a man who is so close to financial penury that he would consider selling his own daughter. For, in the end, it is nothing more and nothing less.”

“And your father *is* such a man, is he not?” Even after all these years, Esme still spoke with caution when she spoke of Isabella’s father.

“Oh yes, he is such a man,” Isabella said with such an open display of distaste that Esme seemed taken aback. “And not only is he a man lacking funds, but he is a man who cares only for his son. I am nothing more than a commodity to be bartered. I am something to be used so that my spoiled little brother can live the full life of an Earl when the time comes. My life is sacrificed to his, is it not?”

“I know it is often so, my dear, but I think this is the cruelest case of such a thing I have ever seen.” Isabella’s open hostility in talking of her father had given Esme the confidence to speak fearlessly herself. “For not only is your father bartering you away as so many fathers have done over the years, but he is bartering you away to a monster, one that the rest of the county would fear to set eyes on.”

“And there is not one thing I can do about it,” Isabella said with a sigh, blinking hard lest the tears finally fall.

And she was determined, above all things that she would not cry about it. Crying would do her no good whatsoever, and she knew it.

“Can your mother not be petitioned to help you?” Esme said in a tone which suggested that even she did not believe such a thing would come to pass.

“I think you know my mother as well as I know her, Esme. She is a weak creature at the best of times, but really, when it comes to something of such magnitude, I cannot think for a moment that she would open her mouth to speak once on the subject.”

“Then it would seem that there is nothing to be done,” Esme said, her voice full of pain at the thought that she was soon to lose a friend.

“Unless, of course, I think of something,” Isabella said doubtfully. “Unless I think of something very soon.”

Chapter 2

The only person in all the world who knew of Isabella's plan was Esme. The two had walked the perimeter of the Upperton Estate and talked the whole thing through.

Isabella had known it would not do to talk in the house, even if they assumed themselves to be alone in the drawing room. Her father's servants lived in fear of the Earl, either fear of his wrath or fear of dismissal, without reference, on a whim.

As such, many of them had turned to taking little stories to the Earl about this, that, and the other, in hopes of somehow generally keeping themselves safe. Isabella did not blame them for it as she did, in part at least, empathize with them.

And so it was that she and Esme had put together a daring plan for escape as they had walked alone on the estate in the cool, early spring air.

And it *was* daring too, for it would require a certain amount of lone travel, something that Isabella had never done before. Furthermore, it would also require reliance on a long-forgotten family member who may, or may not, be on Isabella's side in the thing.

Isabella knew that she would have to put her plan into action almost immediately. A second interview with her father had left her in no doubt that there was not a moment to waste.

“Now that you have had a little time in which to digest the information I gave you last week, I think it is time to discuss the practical arrangements for the wedding,” her father said matter-of-factly.

Their second discussion on the matter did not take place in his study but in the drawing room with her mother in attendance.

The Countess of Upperton sat meekly at one end of a pretty, lemon yellow couch, perched as if she dared not relax entirely. It was a demeanour so often used by Isabella’s mother that she thought it must be, more than anything else, habit.

Whilst Isabella knew that there was much to pity in her mother’s circumstances, she thought that there was more to pity in her own at that moment. The fact that her mother, she knew, would say nothing in her defense, made her quietly angry. Would there ever come a time when her mother would raise her head up for the benefit of her firstborn child? Isabella very much doubted it.

“I see,” Isabella said, knowing that there would be little argument to be had.

“You are to marry the Duke of Coldwell four weeks from now and so, I assume, there is much for you and your mother to discuss regarding preparations.” He smiled in a manner which seemed to jauntily dismiss what he likely thought of as the fripperies of female life.

Isabella wanted to scream; she wanted to stand up and overturn the oval mahogany table and listen to the satisfying smash of the teapot and crockery as everything hit the floor.

Why on earth would her father think that she would be excited about such preparations? He was condemning her to marry a monster, surely it mattered not what she wore. And if this Duke, this ruined, recluse of a man, saw fit to purchase a bride he had never met, she thought it unlikely that he very much cared what she wore either.

“I cannot think that there will be much to prepare,” Isabella said although she was careful to keep her tone respectful.

“Well, there will be your gown, my dear,” the Countess piped up meekly with a frozen smile on her face.

“Oh yes, my gown.” Isabella returned the frozen smile with one of her own. “Well, I am happy to leave such excitement to you, Mama.”

“As long as you understand that you will be well turned out on that

day. I will not have you giving Elliot Covington any reason to turn you away at the last minute. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Papa," Isabella said.

She wondered at the idea of having to make herself beautiful for a man whose face, it was said, was so disfigured that he could not be seen out in society. And yet still it was Isabella, the powerless woman, who had to make herself pleasing. It was she who must hope that the monster would find *her* attractive. How she despised the world she lived in.

Isabella had the beginnings of an idea and, as she let the remainder of the dreadful meeting wash over her whilst she kept silent, she knew that she would have to work on her plan immediately.

Although she had much of her plan worked out before she had seen Esme, to speak it out loud seemed to polish it and make it something more achievable in her eyes.

Isabella had a plan to run to Ireland.

The Countess of Upperton had, Isabella knew, an aunt who lived in Ireland. It was an aunt whom Isabella had the vaguest recollection of meeting once when she was a little girl. The lady had seemed quite elderly to her then, but she supposed that it was a facet of youth.

When you were little, everybody seemed so much older.

Isabella could barely remember the woman's face but had a general impression that she had been very kind and sweet. And, with no other family to speak of who would not give her away immediately, Isabella could think of none other to run to.

From the moment she had hatched the plan, Isabella had been in a highly agitated and nervous state. She had first to discover the exact whereabouts of her great aunt, which necessitated a clandestine search of her mother's papers.

With a household full of quiet, nervous servants, to find an opportunity to search her mother's room was no easy task. Her heart had thundered throughout the entire thing, and she wondered how, in the end, she would manage to go through with her plan if this simple task made her so nervous.

With the address secured and high hopes that her aunt had not moved to some other place in Ireland, there were other plans to make. Esme had procured a timetable of sailings from Liverpool to Ireland and had secretly passed her the paper, which had been folded so many times it was almost unreadable when she had opened it out. Still, she could see that there were regular sailings from Liverpool to Ireland and the timetable, tucked away inside her velvet drawstring purse, gave her quiet fortitude.

As far as making her way from her home in Hertfordshire to Liverpool, Esme had been of great assistance. Being free to make inquiries, Esme had sought out the best route to take.

“You will have to travel post-chaise from St Albans. There will be several changes to make on the journey, and it will take some days, but you will be in Liverpool before anybody thinks to look for you there,” Esme had said with some excitement.

Esme was the finest friend she had ever known. Despite the sadness that she was about to lose her friend to another country altogether, Esme was still determined to help her. She would rather see Isabella hundreds of miles away than have her in the same county, desperate and afraid in a marriage she did not want.

“St. Albans?” Isabella said, wondering how best to get there.

After all, she knew she could not take one of her father’s carriages, nor could she risk having a horse saddled on the pretense of taking an early morning ride.

Whilst this would not have been entirely out of the common way, Isabella knew that there was too much at stake to have a curious servant wonder why it was she was taking a small bag of belongings on her early morning ride. It simply could not be done.

“I can think of no other way of secretly going to St Albans but to walk there,” Isabella had said when the two of them had discussed the problem at length.

“It is but four miles away, and it would, in the end, very likely be the best solution,” Esme said thoughtfully. “But I do not think that it would be wise to walk it in daylight. You risk exactly the same exposure as you would in taking the horse, would you not?”

“Yes, any number of people might see me making my way. And any of the servants might see me leaving Upperton with a bag.”

“As uncomfortable as it might be, I think you might have to leave in the middle of the night. You must be ready to make your way silently out of Upperton Hall and into the darkness. It fills me with dread on your account, my dear, but I think it is the only way.” Esme looked dreadfully concerned.

“It *is* the only way, Esme.” Isabella reached for her hand and squeezed it hard. “Whatever am I going to do without you?”

“You cannot think of that now; you must not.” Esme blinked hard, and Isabella knew she had tears pricking her eyes. “You must think only of the plan and how best to execute it. The two of us will be friends always, have no doubt of that. Wherever you are in Ireland, I shall

write to you every day."

"At least we shall have that, Esme," Isabella said brightly. "Which is likely more than I should be allowed if I am to stay and marry the monster."

"You think it is likely he would not allow you to even correspond with me?" Esme seemed surprised as if she had not previously thought of such a thing.

"It is not a risk I am prepared to take."

"No indeed, nor shall you take it." Esme became practical once more. "For you shall have courage and execute your plan perfectly."

And yet, in the middle of the night, as Isabella crept down the main staircase with her small bag of possessions, she did not feel at all courageous; she felt terrified.

She had decided to come down the main staircase rather than using the back staircase, the narrow staircase used by the servants. Isabella thought it more likely that she might run into one of the servants at that hour than a member of her own family.

And the butler and housekeeper would never allow the rest of the staff to wander at will through the main part of Upperton Hall until it came

five o'clock in the morning and their work began.

Still, despite the fact that she could not imagine who she would happen upon in the middle of the night on the main staircase, Isabella held her breath. She felt a little lightheaded, and her hands were cold and clammy, her grip on the small bag of possessions slipping just a little.

She had an awful feeling that the bag would slip from her grasp altogether and fall noisily down the rest of the staircase, alerting the whole household to her escape. But, in the end, it had not.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Isabella paused in the darkness, her eyes straining to see by the thinnest shards of moonlight. Her eyes began to slowly adjust to the gloom, and she could see no sign that she was anything other than alone in the great hallway.

And yet, she had the most awful feeling.

Isabella waited just a moment longer, determined not to panic or rush things. She could hear nothing, nor see any movement in the darkness. Quite why she had a prickling sensation at the back of her neck, she could not say, although she assumed it must be on account of her heightened excitement and nerves.

Finally, she stepped off the bottom stair and crept silently across the tiles of the entrance hall. The only thing she could hear was the rustle of her own gown as its hem slid across the floor. She paused for a moment, thinking even that amount of noise was too much. Isabella was but three strides away from the great door.

Her heart was beating so hard, and her breathing was so ragged, but she knew she must go on. She must get out of that house. Finally, she made to take the final steps, knowing that she could wait no longer.

“I think you forgot something.” The voice came from behind her, and Isabella almost screamed.

“Anthony?” she said and turned slowly in the darkness.

“Yes, it is.” Isabella and her brother had never been friends, and she wondered if there was any way to appeal to his better nature. “Surely you will need your timetable of the sailings from Liverpool to Ireland.” She could hear the amusement in his young voice; how cruel he sounded.

As he took a few steps towards her, Isabella could see that her brother was holding the much-folded little timetable in his hand. In her heart of hearts, she knew that he was not about to hand it to her and that he was there simply to cruelly taunt her.

“Anthony, you have been through my things to find that, have you not? You have been into my purse,” Isabella said reproachfully.

“Sister, I do hope you are not about to try to teach me about the rights and wrongs of such a thing when you yourself are clearly nothing more than a liar and a cheat who would see your family struggling in the dirt rather than do your duty.”

Isabella knew that her escape had been thwarted. There would be no appealing to her brother’s better nature, for that young man of just fourteen years did not have one. He was nothing more than a younger version of their dreadful father, and she knew it.

“So, you would also see me married to a monster to ensure that you have every luxury in life?” Isabella said, staving off feelings of pure hatred.

“It is your duty.”

“And what is your duty towards me? Or does nobody in this dreadful house have a duty towards my safety and happiness at all?”

“You are but a woman, Isabella. You do not have any right to expect such a thing,” he spoke with casual haughtiness.

He really was a very self-important little man.

“Then you will see why it is that I must leave,” she said and reached for the timetable, despite the fact that she knew he would withdraw it the moment he saw her move.

“You are not going anywhere, Isabella. I will not allow it.”

“You are but fourteen years, and you do not have a right to allow or disallow anything in my world,” Isabella said angrily.

“Why do you not understand that, regardless of your greater years, you are nothing in this household? I will one day be Earl of this great estate, and you will be nobody. You are below me, beneath me, and you always will be.”

Isabella turned and ran for the door. However, just as she reached for the great bolts which had been thrown across dutifully by the butler, she felt her brother seize her mercilessly by the hair and pull her backward.

Isabella did not scream for she did not want to alert anybody to the struggle which was taking place as she bravely fought off her brother. However, her brother yelled and barked until footsteps could be heard coming from all around.

The hallway quickly began to fill with worried-looking servants, none

of whom would have done a thing to rescue her from her brother's cruel treatment. And then, worst of all, she heard the booming voice of her father bellowing from the top of the great staircase.

"What on earth is going on?"

Chapter 3

As the carriage approached the edge of the Coldwell Estate, Isabella let her eyes fall to her lap. She had seen the tangle of trees and thick hawthorns surrounding the grounds and could not bear to look as they approached the thick iron gates.

She had seen the gates before; as a child, she had often peered at them in hopes of seeing something exciting. But she had always been thwarted, for there was nothing to see.

The driveway turned so sharply that an observer at the gates could see no more than a few feet of wide gravel path before it turned and was obscured by yet more thick, twisted hawthorns and extraordinarily tall leylandiis.

The estate really was cut off from the rest of the world, and Isabella wondered if she would ever pass out through the immense gates once she had entered. If she was to be a prisoner in that place for the rest of her life, then it might as well be her tomb, for her life was over.

“Good morning, Lord Upperton.” A man who had opened the gate approached the window of their carriage. “How nice to see you again.”

The man was certainly no servant, despite having unlocked and opened the gates wide with his own hands.

He was a well-dressed man, clearly a gentleman, and Isabella wondered for a moment if he might possibly be the Duke. He was very tall and broadly built, with the vaguest stoop to his bearing as if he were perpetually about to duck. He had pale blond hair, so pale it was hard to tell if it was graying, and pale blue-gray eyes.

But his face was certainly not ruined. It was not handsome, either, but there was no sign of the devastation she had come to expect. He was, perhaps, nearing forty years and so would have easily been the same age as the Duke.

“Ah, Maguire,” her father said shortly. “I trust everything is ready.”

“Indeed, it is, Lord Upperton.” The man nodded at the Earl matter-of-factly, not ingratiating himself to the man at all, despite the fact that he had just been spoken to like a servant.

Unless a man was of equal or greater title to her father, he spoke to them all in the same fashion. For a moment, in spite of her own fears, Isabella felt pleased to see a man who refused, albeit silently, to be cowed by the Earl of Upperton.

“Well, we shall ride on through to the Duke’s chapel and get on with

things," the Earl said and moved away from the window, leaning back in his seat and turning his head in the opposite direction from Mr Maguire before loudly thumping at the ceiling of the carriage with his cane.

How rude he was; how terribly rude.

However, Isabella had greater worries on her mind than her father's appalling attitude. Mr Maguire was clearly not the Duke, and so she knew that she still had to face the monster.

As the carriage rumbled on up the winding gravel driveway, Isabella was too afraid to look up. She imagined such a ruined place, a place full of cobwebs and fear and sadness, and she did not want to see it. She wanted to be herself just a few minutes longer and yet, as she looked down, all she could see was the gown that her mother had the seamstress make for her.

"My dear, it shall need to be fitted again. The seamstress is here, and she is waiting in the morning room. Come, I shall stay with you and make sure that everything fits perfectly." Her mother had approached her with such a tone of lightness that Isabella simply stared at her dumbfounded.

"I care not if the gown fits, Mama," Isabella said angrily. "And I cannot understand why it is you expect me to be full of the excitement

of the young, blushing bride when we both know that there is to be no excitement in my life. There is to be nothing but the fear and horror of being married to a monster, a man I have not yet even met."

"Please keep your voice down, my dear." Lady Upperton looked as frightened as a startled dormouse.

"Yes, of course. After all, why should I do anything to make *your* life difficult, Mother?"

"If you continue in this vein, you shall make *all* our lives difficult." Her mother's tone needled her greatly.

"And so, I am to be the sacrifice in your eyes too, am I? I am to curtsy and smile and be pleased for a gown I wish never to wear, just so that everybody's lives can be made so much simpler. Go away, I do not wish you in the room when I am trying on this dreadful gown," Isabella said and strode off in the direction of the morning room.

Much to her dismay, the seamstress had made the most beautiful wedding gown imaginable. It was made of the purest ivory coloured silk, with an overlay of the most intricate lace Isabella had ever seen. The wide silk ribbon at the Empire line was simple, showing off the lace to its best advantage.

And her maid of many years, with tears in her eyes, had tamed her

dark brown curls, twisting them up onto the back of her head and securing them with the prettiest little combs. And those curls which framed her face were glossier than she had ever seen them.

How Isabella wished herself as ugly as the monster. How she wished she had nothing to offer this dreadful man, for she felt sure that he had nothing to offer her.

In the end, tiring of the sight of her beautiful gown, Isabella finally looked up. The driveway was most awkward, bending this way and that seemingly for its full length. And either side it was lined with tall leylandii trees, effectively screening the driveway off from the rest of the estate. It was as if the Duke would even hide from an approaching visitor.

As the driveway began to straighten and the trees thinned out, Isabella knew that they were finally approaching Coldwell Hall. Her mouth was horribly dry, and her head pounded dreadfully. She could hardly think of a time when she had felt so unwell.

Knowing that she must finally lay eyes upon the place that was to be her prison, she turned to look out of the window and awaited her first view of the hall.

Her father remained silent at her side, sitting on the furthest seat from her. The Earl had spoken not one word to her throughout their

journey, not even to try to reassure her that all would be well. What sort of a father was he?

When Coldwell Hall came into view, it did so quite suddenly. And not only was its appearance sudden that was so surprising.

It was not the dilapidated, ruined place she had imagined. It was an immense, wonderful looking mansion built in the old style, with rounded towers at either end. It was built of a dark gray stone, and ivy and wisteria clung to the front, winding its way around the many stone mullioned windows.

And yet it was clear that the ivy and the wisteria were not neglected, rather they were neatly clipped, giving the whole building a magical appearance.

From the outside, at least, Coldwell Hall was a fairy tale; a good one, rather than a bad one.

The carriage continued around the side of the Great Hall, the driveway not becoming any narrower as it snaked its way down to a small, stone built family chapel.

The building was surrounded by magnolia trees, and Isabella could see the beginnings of new leaves and tiny buds and thought that the little chapel must look magnificent when the trees were in bloom.

Standing at the side of one of the columns of the front porch of the little chapel was a minister. A man of God who was going to marry her to a monster against her will. Was there really nobody to help her?

The moment the carriage drew to a halt, the Earl leaped out and darted around to open her door. He took her hand and gently helped her down as if he were the finest father in creation. He smiled warmly, although Isabella noted that he did not for a moment meet her eyes.

Feeling hot and sick, Isabella stared down at the gravel until she heard the sound of approaching hooves. She looked up to see the man who had let them into the estate, Mr Maguire, drawing up on horseback. He had no doubt ridden back from the gate.

“Well, it looks as if we are all here,” the Minister said and rubbed his hands together hard as if it were a cold day.

Isabella fixed the Minister with a stare and realized that he was nervous. Whether he was nervous of sacrificing a young woman as he must surely know he was about to, or nervous to be in the company of the monster, Isabella could not say. Either way, she found she could not care for his feelings.

“Yes, yes. The time has come,” her father said as if he was trying to coax his guests into dinner rather than forcing his own daughter towards the worst day of her life.

“Right … well …” With a last look at Isabella, the Minister turned his back and dashed inside the small chapel.

When next she saw him, he was already in position at the top end of a small aisle. No doubt he was ready to hear their hasty vows.

The Earl held out his arm for her to take, but she did not take it. Isabella looked at him with every ounce of the hatred she felt for the man. If there were one good thing to come out of this day, it would be that she would no longer be under his control.

Yes, she would be under the control of the monster, but at least she could turn her back on her father forever. She could turn her back on her entire family and the Upperton Estate, never to set eyes on it again.

Turning to look away from him, Isabella marched up the aisle. She could hear her father’s footsteps as he hurried to keep up, doing what he could to maintain appearances. But maintain them for whose sake? After all, there was hardly anybody there.

Besides her father, Mr Maguire, and the Minister, there was only the

bride and groom themselves. What did she care what any of them thought?

Isabella felt suddenly defiant, almost brave. She strode towards the Duke fearlessly. She stared at his back as he looked resolutely towards the front of the little chapel, neither looking left nor right. Obviously, he did not care about the appearance of his bride. But clearly, he did not care about her personality either or, indeed, any little detail of her.

Of course, Isabella felt certain that her sudden flash of anger-fueled bravery could only exist whilst the Duke looked ahead of him.

As she stood at his side, her veil was already away from her face. As she had climbed out of the carriage, Isabella had not bothered to pull it over her maiden cheeks. Perhaps that was something that her mother might have attended to, had she deigned to go with them and see her only daughter married.

Isabella brazenly turned her head to look at the Duke. He was a good deal taller than she, that much she could almost feel as they stood side-by-side. His hair was a dark ash brown, thick and smooth. And, although she knew him to be eighteen years her senior, his fine, olive coloured skin seemed to proclaim otherwise.

For a moment, Isabella stood in some confusion. Was this the Duke of

Coldwell? Was this the monster of the stories that she and Esme had shared, had terrified each other with when they were little?

Surely there must be some mistake. The man who stood at her side, still resolutely staring towards the front of the chapel, was a most handsome man indeed. He had a very strong face in profile, and she could see that his eyes were rather a beautiful green. He had thick brows which were dark, giving him an almost Mediterranean look.

If this was, indeed, the ruined Duke, a man who kept to the walls of his mansion perpetually, then his skin must be naturally dark.

As Isabella studied him quite shamelessly, she thought it an odd musing. What did it matter how he looked? She did not want to marry a stranger, and that was all.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness …” the Minister began without so much as the singing of a hymn to make this anything like a real wedding ceremony.

Isabella barely listened, and twice the Minister had to prompt her to make her responses when giving her vows. She did not want to hear it; she did not want to listen as her individuality was ripped away from her, only to be replaced with the lifelong title of wife. The monster’s wife.

Again, she looked to her side at the man she was marrying and wondered how it could be that his face was so handsome. As far as she could tell, he was not a monster at all.

“I now pronounce you man and wife.” She was vaguely aware that the seal had most definitely been set upon her own fate.

She turned to scowl at the Minister. The shameful man knew exactly what he had done.

“You may kiss your bride, Your Grace,” the Minister said, finally confirming for her that she had, indeed, married the Duke of Coldwell.

For a moment, the Duke did not move. He stood still as he had done throughout the ceremony, still staring at some far-off point in the distance. In the end, Isabella heard the Duke nervously clear his throat as he finally turned to face his wife.

At that moment, when she saw him face on for the first time, Isabella almost screamed. She had not been expecting him to be scarred after all. She had expected the right side of his face to be as smooth and as handsome as the left.

But she did not scream, she could not. The idea that this man was about to kiss her was more than she could stand and, with a deepening sense of panic and her breaths coming harder and harder,

spots appeared before her eyes.

Isabella tried to blink, tried to stay upright but, in the end, she could not. Blackness overtook her, and she was unconscious before she hit the flagstones of the chapel floor.

Chapter 4

When she finally awoke, it was to find herself laying in a large and comfortable bed. Her head was throbbing horribly, and she had no idea where she was.

With that sense of dread that one gets when waking in a strange place, Isabella determined not to open her eyes fully and, instead, simply peered through the tiniest gap. She did not want anybody present to know that she had awoken, at least not until she had her bearings and her memories intact once more.

When she realized that she was alone in the room, Isabella let her eyes fly wide open. She tried to sit up in the bed, despite the throbbing pain. She reached up to touch the back of her head and could feel a pronounced lump there. She must have hit her head surely, or been hit.

Slowly, her memories began to glide back in.

“Oh, dear Lord,” she said, remembering everything with such a sense of desolation.

She was a married woman; that much she knew. And she had not married the handsome man with the green eyes and the dark skin. No,

she truly had been married away to the monster.

With a shudder, she recalled the sight which had finally made her succumb to unconsciousness. Once again, beads of cold perspiration erupted on her back as she remembered the sight she would never forget.

When the Duke had turned to face her in the chapel, the ruination of the right side of his face was plain. The skin was a mixture of angry red and purple with raised lines of silvery white, shiny skin. He had been burned; that much was clear.

The burn had taken almost all that side of his face, and she could see that it would continue down his neck, somewhere beneath his smart necktie. Perhaps the scarring had taken all that side of his body, there was no way of knowing.

His hair seemed largely intact on that side, barring a small, shiny patch of skin by his left temple. Apart from that, the only other part of that side of his face still intact, still as it ought to have been, was his other eye. It stood out starkly, beautiful and green, against the dark and angry skin of his face.

Isabella remembered that in those last moments before the world grew dark, she had stared into those green eyes, and they had fixed her with such a look of pain that she could not bear it.

The door to the chamber opened suddenly, and Isabella gasped.

“Who are you?” she said in a high-pitched voice which gave her away for being almost overcome with fear.

“My name is Kitty Smith, Your Grace. My master sent me in to take care of you,” the woman said and closed the door behind her before walking into the room.

Kitty Smith was an extraordinarily thin woman in late middle age. Her silvery gray hair was pulled back into a harsh bun at the back of her head and her dark gown covered by a brilliant white apron silently informed Isabella that Kitty was a maid.

“Your Grace?” Isabella said, sounding startled.

“You are the Duchess of Coldwell now, Your Grace.” Despite having a thin, almost gaunt face, Kitty Smith’s smile was full of warmth.

“Oh yes, of course,” Isabella said absentmindedly. “But I do not want to be called *Your Grace*.”

“There is no other way for me to address you, not respectfully.”

“Yes, I suppose that is true.” Isabella tried again to sit up in the bed. “I

just feel that I am never to hear my name spoken aloud again. But perhaps a prisoner does not need to hear her own name. Perhaps she does not need to be reminded of the person she once was."

"You must not see yourself as a prisoner." Kitty Smith hurried over to the bed and hastily rearranged the pillows before helping Isabella to sit up a little straighter and lean against them.

"Forgive me. I am being melancholy. I ought not to have said such a thing before you," Isabella said apologetically.

"Not at all, Your Grace," Kitty said kindly. "I daresay it can be an unsettling thing to become suddenly married."

"Married to a man one has never met before." Isabella knew she was saying too much, especially to a maid, but she felt she had no choice.

She did not know where she was within the walls of Coldwell Hall. The mansion had looked immense from the outside, almost like a castle, and she thought she could have been anywhere. She could have been behind any of the windows that she had seen from the outside or a hundred more that were undoubtedly around the back.

It was a thing that she could hardly have worked out, given that the heavy brocade curtains were firmly closed. Despite the fact that two large oil lamps lit the room very well indeed, Isabella had the

impression that it was not full night outside. Perhaps she had not been unconscious for very long at all.

“How long have I been here?” Isabella said, keen to change the subject.

“Some three or four hours, Your Grace. And you have been unconscious for that whole time. You must have hit your head very hard indeed, although the physician says that you will recover completely; he is sure of it.”

“Oh, I shall live,” Isabella said, making it sound like a terrible prospect.

“Oh, Your Grace.” The older woman’s eyes showed most plainly that she felt terribly sorry for Isabella. “You must not think like that.”

“Forgive me, but I feel so very lost.”

“It is understandable, but you will soon grow used to it. Coldwell Hall is a beautiful place, a wonderful home for you.”

“This room certainly seems very nice, Kitty.” Isabella fought hard to make ordinary conversation. “Not at all what I had expected.”

The room was very large and the immense four-poster bed its central

feature. The bed was ornately made and wider than any place she had ever slept in her life.

She could not quite discern the colour of the walls by the light of the oil lamps but thought that they were of a light hue. No doubt, in the daytime, the room seemed very light and bright indeed, especially when the curtains were pulled back from what promised to be very large windows.

“Is it not, Your Grace?”

“No, I suppose I had not imagined that Coldwell Hall would be so well looked after. You see, I had this idea that it would be …” She paused, seeing a look of sadness on Kitty’s face. “Sorry, you must forgive me. I must have hit my head harder than I thought.”

“You need not apologize, Your Grace,” Kitty said. “I am sure that you would not be the only person in the county to think that Coldwell Hall was an old ruin of a place, sinister and decrepit.”

“In truth, that is precisely what I had thought.” Isabella was too exhausted to find some way of successfully denying it. “And there is, of course, much unusual talk of Coldwell Hall and its master about the county. I suppose it is unavoidable, given that the Duke would seem to be something of a recluse.”

“He was never a recluse by choice, Your Grace,” Kitty went on sadly. “But merely circumstances.”

“Yes, I am quite sure.”

“He is a good man, really he is. I know that he is not easy to look upon in the beginning, but you soon come to forget it all.”

“Surely not!” Isabella regretted her words immediately. “I mean, forgive me, but the Duke’s disfigurement is so very extensive.”

“It is, but I promise you there will come a day when you will look at him and not even see it. You have only to give him a chance, and that is all.” There was wisdom in Kitty’s thin, lined face, and it gave Isabella a feeling of safety.

However, despite her polite smiles and nods, Isabella could not for a moment imagine ever looking upon that face and not seeing the scars. How could one look upon such devastation and not see it?

For a moment, Isabella was almost overcome with the desire to find out exactly what had happened to the Duke of Coldwell. She almost asked the maid outright before stopping herself, knowing that her curiosity at such a time was truly inappropriate.

“Have you worked here at Coldwell Hall for a long time, Kitty?” Once

again, Isabella deftly changed the subject.

“Longer than I care to remember, Your Grace.” Kitty chuckled as she made her way to a great mahogany dresser and opened one of the drawers. “I have been here more than thirty years since His Grace was nothing but a boy.”

“Then you must be very happy here, Kitty.”

“I could not imagine being more settled anywhere else. But perhaps that is because I do not know anything else anymore. I was but one and twenty when I first came here as lady’s maid to the last Duchess, His Grace’s mother.”

“You had done well to have such a position by that age, Kitty.”

“I had always wanted to be a lady’s maid; to fix a fine lady’s hair and attend to her wardrobe. When I first came to Coldwell Hall, it was my dream come true.” She turned from the dresser holding an immaculately white nightgown.

She seemed to have drifted off into thoughts of the past, to the days when she was a busy lady’s maid to a fine Duchess.

“How wonderful,” Isabella said as she tried to find some normality in the conversation.

“But it has been more than eighteen years since I have been able to undertake my old duties,” Kitty spoke sadly.

“I am terribly sorry.” Isabella realized that that must surely have been when the old Duchess had died.

Of course, she did not think she ought to ask for any further details until she had come to know Kitty Smith a little better. She was still so very out of sorts and most uncomfortable to be living in Coldwell Hall that she did not want to alienate her potential ally.

“Perhaps when you come to think about your own lady’s maid, Your Grace, you might consider me?” Kitty said a little shyly. “I realize that I am not a young woman anymore, but I have kept myself well informed of the current fashions and hairstyles.”

“I should be very pleased, Kitty,” Isabella said genuinely. “After all, you have done much to put me at my ease on a most difficult day.”

“I know it is difficult for you, Your Grace.” Kitty laid the beautiful nightgown out over the foot of the bed. “But things will settle down, I promise you. All will be well.”

As Kitty spoke, Isabella could feel her warmth. It was almost as if everything truly *would* be well, despite the fact that Isabella could see

no evidence of it.

“Kitty, is my father still here?” The sudden thought made Isabella sit bolt upright, her pillows tumbling left and right behind her and her head throbbing painfully.

“I am afraid he is not, Your Grace,” Kitty said, and Isabella could see the hint of disapproval in the woman’s eyes. It was disapproval that made Isabella warm to her all the more.

“If I were to hazard a guess, Kitty, I would say that my father was already stepping back into his carriage as I lay unconscious on the flagstones of the chapel.” Isabella heard the bitterness.

“I could not say, Your Grace. The Duke and Mr Maguire brought you straight over to the hall. His Grace carried you himself.” Kitty smiled as if the idea was most romantic. “And then he sent immediately for the physician. There was much hustle and bustle, and I cannot say that I saw your father in the hall at any point.”

“Quite so; my own experience tells me that I ought not to have assumed that he would have waited long enough to discover if I was even to live.” Isabella’s voice faltered, and she felt suddenly tearful and extremely sorry for herself.

It was not that she missed her father, nor even did she want him

there. It was just the idea that she was genuinely uncared for in this world. At least uncared for by anybody who could do anything to preserve her circumstances. If only Esme were there with her; if only she could hold her friend's hand for one last time. The thought of it finally made her cry. And it was the first time she had cried in all of it; from the moment her father had declared she would marry, these were the first tears she had shed.

Her resolve to remain steadfast had finally broken.

"There, there, my dear," Kitty said, and Isabella was relieved that she had chosen an endearment rather than *Your Grace*. "Just because you have left behind a family of little care does not mean that you have walked into another just the same. You will find people here who cared greatly, really you will. There is little wonder that you are afraid, what young woman would not be? And I shall help you in any way I can, and you will find that I am not the only one. You will be cared for, my dear, really you will." Kitty had perched awkwardly on the side of the bed and had reached out to take Isabella into her arms.

Whilst she was the maid, she was still an older woman with much more idea about the world and its goings-on than Isabella had. And, in the style of many an older woman, she could not bear to see a younger woman so distressed, so wanting for affection, and not provide it.

And, for her part, Isabella could not have been more grateful. She needed a friend more than anything in the world.

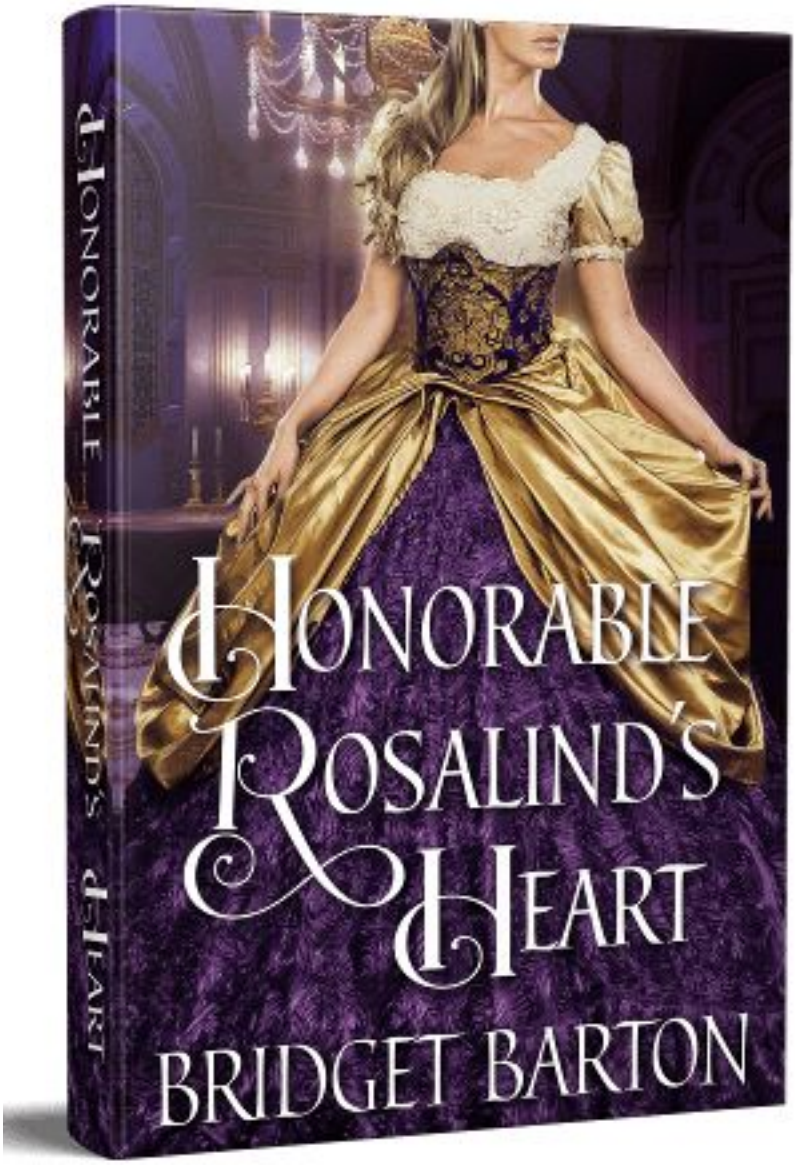
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